

Getting to Know Jim Hopper by Taylor Robinson

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Summary: Told from the perspective of an OC bartender who meets Hopper for the first time about a year before the events of the show. She tries her best to help him work through the pain of losing his daughter. In doing so, she learns about him and falls deeply in love with him. Story will continue through the first and second seasons.

1. The First Two Meetings

The First Time

The first time I met Chief of Police Jim Hopper, he intrigued me. Granted, I didn't know that he was the Chief of Police at the time. Or even a cop. All I knew is he walked into the bar in the middle of the day and ordered a shot of Bushmill's Black Bush. And then, once I had finally found the bottle, proceeded to order two more shots within two minutes.

That sort of heavy day drinking itself was not what I found so intriguing. Rather, it was his patience. This was only my third day at barkeeping, and, contrary to my protests, the managers arrange the alcohol by price rather than alphabetical. For someone whose only real experience with alcohol previous to this job was drinking from kegs of beer at bonfires and serving glasses of wine, the arrangement was completely nonsensical.

But, unlike the typical alcoholic, Hopper waited calmly while I struggled: no derisive remarks about my age or gender, no threats of complaining to my manager, just silent meditation. This behavior was so unusual that by the time I had found the bottle and was able to serve him, my hands were visibly shaking since I had spent every second of my search waiting for him to explode with anger.

For the entire thirty minutes he spent on that stool, he said nothing to me other than his order even though the bar was empty than himself. After downing his fourth shot, he simply tossed down a ten and headed for the door.

"This is too much - I need to give you your change," I called after him. With just a hint of drunken swagger, he turned in the doorway, fixing me with a stare that was only slightly less pained than it was when he walked in, and he told me to keep it as a tip. A tip? After my incompetent service? There was enough leftover to cover another shot!

"Take care," he muttered and left while I was still staring at the bill, dumbfounded. And incredibly curious. I always wonder about the

lives of everyone who I served, but there was something especially intriguing about this man who downed four shots without an outward sign of intoxication, waited patiently for his order despite clearly needing a fix for his habit, and yet still tipped excessively well. And I couldn't deny that the depth of those blue eyes and that strong jaw helped to imprint the man on my memory.

The Second Time

The second time I saw him, he impressed me. Not only did his patience continue, but when he spoke, I agreed with every word.

I remembered his face when he walked in again about a week later, but finding his bottle of choice was still an embarrassingly time-intensive task. This time he took care of eight shots before he left, but after his first three, he turned his attention to the news program I had playing in the background since the place was empty again.

"I can change it to a game," I offered. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to drink to Reagan's fraudulent speech.

"No, this is fine. I try to keep myself informed of what's going on. Might as well do it now." He downed his glass. "I'm half-tempted to have you pour me a shot every time the President lies, but I'll be broke before the hour is up." I laughed at the unexpected wit. And was pleasantly surprised that this handsome frequent customer shared my political leaning - this is a pretty red area.

"Or dead," I added, perhaps more darkly than a bartender should, but he laughed heartily while I refilled his glass without him needing to ask.

"I trust you would cut me off before that point," he replied with a wink that I had to pretend didn't make my heart flutter. "I'm surprised someone of your age has been following this recession bull. It's pretty complex, and you barely look old enough to vote."

"I suppose I'll take that as a compliment, but I'm more than old enough to vote," I leaned in and whispered as if sharing a secret. I felt triumphant when he laughed. The day had been slow, and at that

point he had enough booze in him that I trusted my ham-handed attempts at flirtation wouldn't be remembered.

That second day was one of my favorite shifts I'd worked in my years as a server and definitely my favorite as a barkeep so far. No one else had come in for hours, and he and I talked until the dinner rush. We shared our distaste for the President's foreign and domestic policy, mocked the hysteria surrounding communism, and toasted to increasing global human rights (he bought me a shot of what he was drinking, insisting that I ought to know what I was serving him). Besides politics, we rocked out to Blondie and AC/DC and toasted to the Hoosier's latest win.

At that point, I was used to the day-time customers being very conversational - always talking about themselves, their lives, their families, their troubles (especially their troubles) - but everytime I so much as hinted at asking Hopper about himself, he would deflect the conversation.

"Have you lived here long?" I asked, dying to get more of a handle on this mysterious man.

"I've been here a few years. What about yourself? In a town this small, I would have expected to have run into you before now if you'd been here long."

"I moved here two months ago. My mom and dad got divorced, and she moved here since the cost of living is much lower than nearer the city. I came with her to help cover the bills, and she was sort of a mess after. My dad had been unfaithful, and it really shook her up..." I remember I trailed off, unsure where this talkativeness had come from. But there was something in his eyes that made me want to tell him anything he wanted to hear, whatever that may be.

"Cost of living might be lower here, but so are wages. Not many young women would choose this sleepy town and a smaller paycheck over independence."

"Perhaps, but that wouldn't have made me any more happy. I think family is more important." I still remember the look of pain that crossed his face, and I noted that he polished off his drink.

I checked for a wedding band, thinking that his reaction and tight lips were because he had a wife who wouldn't approve of him being here and didn't want word to get back to her, but his hand was bare. The whole day, the only concrete information about him that I was able to weasel out of him was his surname - Hopper.

Things picked up once five o'clock rolled around, and I got too busy throwing together cocktails for the servers to spend much more time with him, and he ducked out an hour later, once again leaving behind a far too-generous tip. Now I had a name to go with his face and favored drink, and I found it echoing through my mind the rest of the night anytime I had a spare moment.

2. The Third Meeting

The Third Time

The third time my path crossed with Hopper, he left me infatuated. Stupid on my part? Incredibly so. But when a handsome man saves you from drunken lowlifes, a gal gets a little crush. And she remembers the day vividly.

Two truckers had stopped in just as we opened at noon. Since that time of day is so slow, at most three people are scheduled to work: the bartender, the chef, and a manager. That day, it was just me and a chef who happened to be the laziest member of the staff. He prefers the early shifts since there's usually nothing for him to do. Most of the time, I would bring an order to the back only to find him napping, smoking, or completely missing, sometimes for an hour at a time.

When these two men walked in and started drinking fast and hard, I could feel that there was going to be trouble, and I knew I might very well be on my own to deal with it. At least the streets were pretty busy with people doing grocery shopping in preparation for Thanksgiving dinner, so I had a worst-case-scenario solution plan to abandon the bar and run outside.

As the hours passed uneventfully, my sweaty palms and shortness of breath felt like an overreaction, so I slowly made myself relax. Sure, they were talking crudely, and they were getting more boisterous as they drank, but they hadn't been paying me too much attention, instead focusing on the playoff football game. All the same, when Hopper walked in, I felt a huge weight lift off my chest. At the sight of him, I flashed him an even bigger smile than would have under normal conditions. He's a big guy - tall, build like an ox, big hands - and I knew these two would have to be idiotic to think to try anything with a man like Hopper around.

Hopper took one look at the bunch that were spilling their beer and throwing peanut shells on the floor and choose the stool all the way at the opposite end of the bar. I got his whiskey served before he could ask, but when I walked away to refill the mugs of the other

duo, he beckoned me back over first.

"Hit me twice more." Three shots in a minute? If it had been just the two of us, I would have tried (almost certainly unsuccessfully) to ask what was wrong. Instead I just poured him the double and served the truckers, who were now asking for shots in addition to the beers.

Unlike the second time we met, Hopper showed no interest in conversation. He didn't even seem to be watching the game as he downed shot after shot. When I had a free moment between getting the two men drinks and running their food orders to the kitchen, I spent it cleaning at imaginary stains on the bar down by Hopper. Just being closer to him made me feel safer, and I was really hoping he would start talking and slow down on the liquor - I didn't want to serve him to the point of coma, and based on the lack of color in his skin and his sightless gaze, and I was worried he was already close to that point.

"Barmaid, where's our chicken fingers?" one of the men shouted at me.

"I'll go check. Sorry for the delay," I said with a smile. It was a relief to get away from them and to the back until I realized the chef had cut out without even making the latest order I had given him. A frantic but thorough search of the kitchen revealed it chicken-finger-less. I muttered a (rather impressive) string of curses under my breath at Carl, but there was nothing I could do until he got back. I put on my best hostess smile and prepared for whatever lashing I would get from the truckers.

"Thank you for your patience, but I'm afraid it will be a little longer. Our chef is on break right now," I told them once I had the barrier of the bar counter between us.

"Well, honey, when does he get off break?" one of them asked with cloying condescension.

"It won't be too long," I said with a prayer that would be the truth. I hoped that would be the end, so I turned away to see if Hopper needed anything, only to find him barely upright.

"We've been waiting plenty long enough as is," the other one piped in.

"I'm very sorry about that. When you get them, they'll be on the house," I promised and turned away, pretending to busy myself cleaning glasses. That would be coming out of Carl's check, no question about it.

"Stupid bitch," I heard stage-whispered behind me. Every muscle in my back tensed as if struck, but I tried to pretend I didn't hear.

"For this wait, we deserve better than them on the house."

"Yeah, we deserve to get a *piece* of the house. Maybe a little show."

"Or to get *on* the house ourselves." My stomach felt like lead, and a surreptitious glance towards Hopper showed he was very much out of it.

"Hey, bitch," the mouthier one called. I froze. I couldn't respond to such a name but ignoring them would probably make them madder.

"Whore, he's talking to you," the other one chimed in. I couldn't exactly pretend I didn't hear them, considering they were two of the three customers.

"I presume you're talking to me, but I don't respond to such disrespectful terms." That just made them laugh hysterically. My skin felt cold, but I could feel my face burning red.

"Heinrich and I are getting pretty bored waiting here for our food. And you've got some decent meat on you. Show it off for us, baby." I was so floored that someone was talking to me like that I completely lost my voice.

"No need to be shy, whore. Not if you want any sort of tip," the second one threatened.

"Get out. Neither of you is welcome here any longer," I said once I finally recovered. I wasn't going to take this abuse, and I would rather pay for everything they ordered than be practically alone with them another second. But they didn't move. They just laughed.

"She wants us to leave," the first said, making them laugh harder. The longer they laughed, the farther my stomach sank. They suddenly stopped laughing.

"Make us," one dared, eyes and voice like iron. My mouth was dry, and I was frozen. My eyes darted for the phone across the room, and somehow these drunken idiots still managed to pick up on that.

"Aww, you've scared her, Maurice. She wants to call the po-weece," the other mocked. "I think you need to be taught a lesson in customer service, you cheeky slut." He stood now, blocking the swinging door exit from behind the bar. I instinctively backed away from him. I knew the little latch on the inside of the swinging counter wouldn't be able to stop him. "Stuck up bitches like you need to know that when a customer asks for some skin, you give it to him. Or he'll take it. And that slutty pussy too. Right, Heinrich?" The other man stood too and approached the side of the bar, obviously getting ready to grab me if I tried to hop it.

"Right. Dumb bitches need to be taught how to serve." I backed against the far wall and got my hand around the neck of a beer bottle. If either of them made a move closer to me, I was going to break the bottom for a makeshift weapon.

"See, personally, I thought she was doing a great job." I whipped around at the sound of another voice, shocked to see Hopper on his feet. "So there's no need to 'teach' her anything, right, gentlemen?" I tried not to let the sigh I heaved be too obvious. His words are slurring, so he obviously not sober, but these bastards wouldn't be stupid enough to try to hurt me in front of a witness, right?

"Stay out of this, whoever you are. This is between us and this bad barwhore, so keep out of our way, and we won't hurt you too," the man blocking my exit said while his friend cracked his knuckles ominously. So much for relief.

"You don't actually think I would just sit back and let you brutalize this nice young woman, do you?"

"You won't? Well, then, what are you going to do about it, sunnny?"

"I could do plenty. Arrest you, maybe, if I'm a cop." This made them burst out laughing. I moved to take advantage of their distraction and brain one of them with the bottle, but a solemn head shake from Hopper stopped me.

"Luckily for us then that you clearly aren't a cop, you drunk bastard," the one closest to him said.

"Then I guess I'll just have to knock the two of you around so bad you don't ever dare try this again. Maybe mess you up so bad you won't ever have the chance, keep you in wheelchairs and on feeding tubes the rest of your sorry days."

"I'd like to see you try," the one blocking the door said, moving away from me and closer to a heavily intoxicated Hopper. I remember frantically trying to calculate if I should 911 or run out to the street to get help before Hopper was beat up too badly.

The two devils stalked until they were on both sides of Hopper. I was holding my breath, waiting for the first blow to fall and trying to figure out what the hell Hopper was thinking - had he just made a diversion for me to get out?

The two lunged at him, and faster than I could see, Hopper had one flat on his back and the other howling in pain and clutching at his face. Two merciless punches later, the one that had stil beenl on his feet was out cold on the floor. Due to the shock, I actually dropped the bottle I had been clutching, shattering it.

As I watched in a daze, Hopper cuffed the two drunken buffoons together, looping the chain of the hand cuffs through the bars of one of our nailed-down barstools.

"You *are* a cop?" I finally managed to say.

"Sumthing like that, yeah. I'm going to go radio for backup," he said, walking stiffly and with only a hint of a stagger out to his car. While he did that, I phoned the owner, telling him what had just happened. I avoided looking at the bloodied, drunk attempted-rapists until Hopper was back. I felt too vulnerable.

"Two cars will be here in a few minutes. If anyone asks, but hopefully they will have the good sense not to, I stopped in to see if everything was okay when I noticed through the window you looking awful scared."

"Won't they expose the lie?" I asked, nodding at the lumps.

"Not if they have any brains whatsoever." Hopper approached the criminals then, and kicked them until they stirred. I winced but made no objection - the worse he hurt them, the better. I still can't think about what would have happened if Hopper hadn't been there that day without breaking down in a panic.

"Hey, assholes, you're under arrest for assaulting an officer, attempted sexual assault, and conspiracy to commit assault." One of them muttered something that sounded distinctly like a promise of retribution against me. "What was that?" Hopper asked, kneeling down and picking the man off the floor by his shirt.

"I said I'm gonna fuck that bitch as soon as you're not looking, you dirty pig!" Hopper knocked the man out again with a right hook. Police sirens sounded in the distance.

"Hopper, thank you so much. I-I don't know what I would have done without your help. I...Thank you." He held up a hand to stop my stammered gratitude.

"No need to thank me, I was just doing my job," he grumbled.

"Do you want ice for your knuckles?" I exclaimed, realizing he was bleeding and his hand was swelling.

"No," he waved off my fussing. "They'll need to be photographed for evidence. Where's that damn chef that's supposed to be here?" Just then Carl came bursting in from the back.

"Why are there cops here?" He took in the sight of the two beaten drunks. "What the hell happened here?"

"While you were playing hookie from your job, Tricia here," he read from my name tag, "was almost assaulted. And don't think I'll leave that out from my report, Carl."

"Chief Hopper-" Carl began to stutter, but there wasn't anything else for him to say. Just then more cops arrived, loading the two criminals into the back of squad cars. They then took a statement from me, Hopper, and Carl.

The bar's owner and manager arrived just as the cops were leaving, and they got the full report of what happened from Hopper while I cleaned up the bottle I dropped. I didn't know if they would blame me for the incident, maybe they would think I should have been more tolerant of the drunkards' behavior, so I made myself scarce. From what I could hear of Hopper's retelling, he was surprisingly cognizant throughout the whole thing.

"Tricia," the manager had come over to the bar. "You can take the rest of the day off - paid," he added.

"Really?" I perked up. That was almost unheard of.

"Yeah, you've been through plenty today. We'll dock the hours from Carl's pay - maybe that will make him think twice about ducking out." I ducked my head. That thorny aspect of the afternoon incident was another reason I didn't be the one to relay what happened. "We can talk tomorrow with Roberto," that was the owner, "about maybe hiring bouncers, but for now just relax."

"Thank you." I dropped what I was doing, grabbed my purse, and was out the door.

3. The Fourth Meeting

The fourth time I saw Hopper, he was all business. Granted, that didn't stop my heart from pounding every time my eyes met those pretty blue ones. He came into the bar a few days after those two assholes had been arrested; there was still a bloodstain on the wooden floor from the broken nose Hopper gave one of them.

"Tricia," he called, and I whirled around, jumping a few inches.

"Hopper, I didn't hear you come in," I exclaimed. With a jolt of guilt, I noticed his still-swollen knuckles. I hope he didn't break any on my account, I thought while turning around to grab a glass and his bottle of choice.

"No, none of that today," he said with a dismissive wave. "I'm just stopping by to update you on the case." He didn't need to elaborate - there was only one case he would come by about. My chest felt heavy - if they had gotten out on bail, I knew I wouldn't be able to stop myself from worrying about my safety. "After their arrest, we searched their truck and found a gun, and we traced that to an open robbery case in Cleveland. Now, that case takes precedent, so my boys are transferring those two lowlifes out to that district so they can stand trial. In the unlikely event that they get acquitted, they'll come back here and face charges. All in all, they're looking at at least five years on the robbery then two more for what they did here. So you won't have to worry about them for a long time."

"What if they get out on bail in Cleveland?" I asked, mouth dry. I could see someone holding quite a grudge against the person that got them facing seven years jail time.

"I doubt they will. I'll put an alert on the case so we will be notified if they are, and I'll keep you in the loop." My face must have betrayed my thoughts because he added, "And if they did bother coming back here instead of just disappearing, I think they'd want revenge more on me than you."

"That doesn't make me feel all that better," I said with a dry smile.

"The general store down the street sells guns, if you're that worried. Some of them small enough to fit in a purse."

"Thanks for the tip," I said sincerely.

"Sure thing." He rapped his knuckles on the bartop and stood to leave.

"Hopper, I don't feel like I've had the chance to properly thank you for what you did. I mean, it was....it means a lot," I finished lamely. I had days to plan out what I was going to say to him, but when the time came, I fumbled the thing.

"I was just-"

"Doing your job, I know," I finished. "But I can still thank you for doing it. And for doing it so well, taking care of those two bastards for me. I...I'm grateful, is all." When I had finished, he was flushed pink and couldn't meet my gaze for some reason.

"I'm glad I was there to help," he finally answered and headed for the door. I couldn't help but feel a sense of loss as he left. I had been hoping for another hours-long conversation with him only slightly hammered, but that hadn't been on the agenda today. I wondered, with anxiety, if it ever would be, or if he would ignore the bar from now on due to the unpleasant memories of dealing with those two men. Only time would tell, and thankfully, that wasn't the case.

It was rather pathetic to be so invested in a man I'd met only three times prior, but there was something about him that captivated me. Part of it was his looks, no doubt about it, but there was something more as well. His eyes held so much intelligence and also so much pain. From what I had seen, it was obvious he was adept at his job, but he also spent a considerable amount of time inebriated. It seemed incredibly contradictory; I didn't often see drunkards making great strides in their careers. I'd been at this job a few weeks now, and of the handful of regulars, he's by far the most interesting.

He was a puzzle, and I wanted to solve him. Why does he drink, what pain is he running from? And, can I help him? I would like to. It hurt me to see someone in so much pain, and even if protecting me from

those drunkards didn't save my life, it definitely saved me a great deal of physical and emotional pain. That's a hard debt to ever repay, but I would like to try.

4. The Nth Meeting

The Nth Time

That whole ordeal was some months ago, and I've seen Hopper probably over fifty times since then, yet I know him no better. He comes in to the bar about twice a week, and he always orders the same thing, but how much of it he drinks varies: sometimes he leaves barely able to stand and others he shows no sign of intoxication. Today is going to be one of the former, I can tell the moment he stalks through the door. Wordlessly, I pour him the usual as he tosses his hat on the stool next to him. And then two more shots in succession as he downs them.

As I do every day Hopper comes in scowling and tense, I wonder what has sent him my way. But at this point, I know better than to ask. I'll be met with either silence or a terse "police business." If he wants to talk, he always takes the initiative. So I do my job and try not to be too obvious while I check him out from the corner of my eye.

Sure, he could afford to lose a few pounds, but it makes his uniform entrancingly tight. From my perch at the bar the many nights Hopper has been in, I've noticed I'm not the only woman in Hawkins who finds him quite the specimen. Considering how many of those women he's left with, that hasn't escaped him either. I ignore the flutter of jealousy such memories cause. So what if he hasn't given me a second glance since we met. It's not like I'm starving for invitations - pretty much every other regular has asked me to dinner at least once. Granted, none of them have half of Hopper's brawn or brains....

I scrub at a sticky spot on the counter to push that train of thought from my head. I've agonized over this for far too many hours already. Why it's such a blow to my self-esteem that one particular man doesn't want me I still haven't been able to puzzle out. One of the other customers waves me over to request a refill on his fried pickles. I'm glad for the excuse to go to the kitchen and out of Hopper's immediate presence. I need to get a grip on myself. Head-over-heels over an alcoholic at least ten years my senior who usually doesn't even speak to me - if my mother knew, god forbid, the lecture would

never end.

"Slow day?" the cook on duty asks while I wait for the order, shaking me from my rumination.

"Yeah, just James Cowl, Harriet, and Hopper." Mark nods, rubbing a free hand over his potbelly.

"At least you'll do pretty well for the hour, what with Hopper here." Hopper's generous tipping has become renowned among the staff. They all claim he only tips like that when I'm working and tease it is because he "wants" me, which only makes reality sting more.

"Maybe," I reply. I don't like to jinx things by expecting they'll happen. I grab the freshly-fried food and head out, delivering the order and refilling Hopper's glass as I pass. By the time I've tended to my last customer, Hopper is waving me over again.

"What can I do for you?" I'm hoping he'll ask for food. He rarely does, but when he does, he stays longer and doesn't get drunk enough that I worry about alcohol poisoning.

"You got anything stronger than this?" he slurs, shaking his half-empty whiskey to emphasize his meaning. My eyebrows shoot up.

"I-I don't know. I'll have to check, but that's, what, seventy proof?" He nods slowly. I do some quick calculations in my head. Four drinks in an hour, and he's already slurring? He usually holds up better than that. "Hopper," I snap my fingers in front of my face to focus his gaze, "were you drinking before you came in here?" He shrugs half-heartedly. I'll take that as a yes.

"I didn't ask you if I had been drinking already. I asked if you had anything stronger." I raise my eyebrows at the rebuke - he isn't usually harsh like that to me.

"Let me check," I answer and turn to the rows of bottles. I check the ones for mixing - the highest I can find is 90. "Well, this is 90, but it's not meant to be drunk straight-

"Hit me." I glance at the other two customers for some sort of guidance, but one is staring into his drink, pretending this little scene

isn't happening, and the other is slightly shaking her head with a frown, but nursing her drink.

"Alright." I obediently pour a shot that he tosses back. "Another," he demands. I try to meet his gaze while I pour, but he's staring at the glass. My stomach twists. I'm going to have to start refusing to serve him pretty soon, he's getting that drunk, but I haven't had to do that with him yet, and I have no idea how he'll react.

"That's better," he says with a grimace after downing the shot, turning the glass upside down. "Another whiskey, Tricia," he slurs. Normally, my heart would flutter at hearing my name in his mouth, but now it just sinks. I feel like I'm enabling this behavior. But I pour all the same and walk away to check on the others. At least that will delay me giving him another drink.

"More pickles, James?" He shakes his head.

"Top me off though?" I nod and refill his mug of beer.

"Anything for you, Harriet?"

"Just the tab, sweetheart." I nod and ring her up, ignoring the other side of the bar to make sure Hopper can't catch my eye and wave me over. I bring her the receipt, and as she signs, she sighs and whispers to me, "May is always a bad time for him, daughter's birthday and all." I try to keep my face neutral. Daughter? That's news. I can't press for details with him here, so my burning curiosity will have to wait.

"Thanks for the information," I whisper back.

I think about what Harriet said as I clean up her place, wiping down the counter and clearing her glasses. She's been a resident of Hawkins since birth and barfly for the past thirty years or so, so I trust she is an authority on town gossip. But why would a child's birth month be difficult? I suppose if you couldn't see her anymore - maybe her mother got custody in a divorce due to Hoppers drinking? I risk a glance at Hopper in the mirror on the wall; he's looking in my direction with an empty glass, so I redouble my efforts to look busy.

As I'm looking away, I notice a flash of blue on his wrist - a bracelet

I've noticed many times before but have never dared to ask about. It's slightly feminine and not at all something an adult would wear. I wonder...could she have died? The conclusion is awful enough to make my breath catch, but it would sort of make sense.

"I need a refill," he calls. I slowly walk towards him. "I know you were trying to ignore me," he says once I'm across from him. I choose not to respond to that - damn cop instincts.

"Stand up," I tell him.

"What?" he slurs, lit cigarette forgotten in his hand.

"I'm not going to serve you until you stand up." He scoffs and fixes me with an annoyed stare but turns to do so, swaying dangerously on the stool. I shake my head, but he does make it to his feet, and he even walks in a little circle at my continued silent skepticism. "Alright," I concede and pour, but I skim a little, which I know he notices.

"I can handle myself," he says quietly, managing to look me in the eyes. It strikes me how much sadness there is in his dark blue eyes.

"I'm sure you can. But when you come in here, I want to help make sure that you do." He doesn't speak or look away, so I continue holding his gaze.

"You this attentive to all your customers?" he asks after a sip. I shrug, putting the bottle away.

"I try to make sure I don't put anyone in a coma, yeah. Wouldn't want those no-good cops coming after me," I say with a dark smile. That manages to elicit a lopsided grin from him.

"Most bartenders care more about profit than safety," he says after a long drag on his cigarette.

"Then you might want to go to one of those bars the next time you want to drink yourself to unconsciousness," I say sarcastically and then wish I hadn't - what if he actually did and something happened to him? "But I would prefer you come here so I can fuss over you," I'm saying before I can care about any implications of that statement. I add a wink to tell him I'm jesting.

"I'm glad I mean so much to you," he replies with a cheeky grin. I tell my pounding heart that he's just following up on my teasing - he hasn't found me out. But my mouth is too dry and my brain too panicked to muster an appropriate response, so I just smile and pretend I need to check on James and was glasses.

A few drinks later, Hopper's radio crackles.

"Chief, we got a report of vandalism at Big Buy." He sighs heavily and polishes off his drink.

"On my way over," he says back, barely slurring. That store is only a few minutes away, so he can walk there, thankfully.

"What do I owe you for those vodka shots?"

"A dollar each is probably fine." We don't buy that great of alcohol for the mixed drinks. He throws cash on the bar - with enough for a too-generous tip, especially considering how I nagged at him - and walks out the door. I'm glad he's leaving to go work. If he was leaving because I refused to keep serving him, he probably would have drunk completely alone, with no one to cut him off.

As the door swings shut, James starts talking.

"It's pretty impressive how well he keeps things together in this town despite his habit." I hastily finish cleaning Hopper's spot and walk closer to James.

"No kidding." James is a regular and relatively closed-lipped, so if I'm going to discuss this with anyone, it might as well be him. "I'm surprised he's so public about his drinking...as Chief of Police in this little town, I would think he has the responsibility to maintain a certain amount of propriety." James just laughs.

"Folks might talk, but no one really minds so long as he keeps doing his job so good." I suppose that makes sense.

"I wonder how good of a cop he would be without the alcohol though." James shrugs and takes another sip of his beer.

"Who knows. Maybe he'd be worse - ya never know. He's a good man,

shame about his daughter." I lean in, unable to stop myself from asking.

"What happened? Today is the first I've heard about a daughter." He snorts in surprise.

"I suppose Hopper has always been closed lipped, and he doesn't like to talk about her much. She died a few years ago, cancer. Such a shame. He still hasn't quite gotten over it." I figure I have one question left before James loses interest in the conversation and/or my interest in it will become suspect.

"Yeah, it looks that way," I say. "Does his wife, I assume there was a wife," he nods, "do the same thing - drink - to cope?" He shakes his head.

"I wouldn't know. Never actually met the woman myself. He met her in the city, and when they divorced after his daughter's death, he moved back here." Back? So there was a time he was here before...interesting. I just nod and busy myself with properly cleaning the counter.

5. The First Touch

The First Touch

A few days later, Hopper comes in with a stagger. For the second before I realize he's already drunk, I think he's being flirtatious - wishful thinking, I suppose.

"Hopper, you didn't drive here, did you?" I admonish. A guilty look crosses his face.

"Well, I drove to the area, but I went to Ernie's first." I knew he went to other bars, but I didn't think he was the barhopping type.

"I see. Did they kick you out?" I tease while getting his whiskey.

"No, it was getting too loud," he answers softly. I'm surprised - not that he prefers a quieter scene but that he was willing to divulge that.

"Well, it should be plenty quiet here for at least a few hours." It's just before 2 PM, and we've got one table of two that's here for the fried food and two people at the bar. "Anything to eat?" I'm hoping to put something in his stomach to slow down the impacts of the drinks. I have no idea how much he drank at Ernie's. I might phone them from the back...

"Not right now, thanks." I turn away with a stretch. It's been a slow day. "When'd you get that?" I glance around to make sure he's talking to me.

"Get what?"

"That tattoo on your hip." I can feel myself blush - I didn't realize I had shown skin.

"About a month ago. It's supposed to be a secret," I say with a small smile. "My mom would kill me if she found out."

"What is it?" he asks while lighting a cigarette.

"A map," I say somewhat abashedly. "It's kinda dumb, but I want to

go to every continent, so when, or I guess, if, I do, I'll get it colored in." He looks confused, so on impulse, I walk a bit closer to the bar, stand on my tip toes, and flip the waistband of my jeans down enough to show the other half. I steal a glance around the bar to make sure no one else is looking, so I miss his reaction, whatever it may have been.

"It looks good," he says somewhat stiffly. Does it not? I dare not show anyone else to get a second opinion, considering the stigma everyone I know holds against tattoos. "And if you want it to be a secret, you might benefit from tucking your shirt in," he says with a small smile.

"Thanks for the advice, Officer," I say with a wink. I refill his glass since I'm nearby and then check on the table and bring their finished plates back to the kitchen.

"Bet Hopper will give you an extra big tip today," Marge - today's chef - says as I come in.

"What do you mean?"

"Giving him a little show? Guaranteed to make his heart melt," she says with a throaty laugh. My face is scarlet. How did she even see that? "What? I like to monitor the place from time to time," she explains to my shocked face.

"He was asking about a birthmark, is all," I explain, still flushed.

"Mhmm, and if that was an innocent inquiry on his part, I'm a hippopotamus."

"How do you mean?" I probably shouldn't ask, but I can't completely ignore the comment.

"All I'm saying is he was hoping you'd do just that - flash him a bit more skin." I shake my head and roll my eyes, and thankfully she's moving the conversation on. "Table three done?"

"I just gave them the dessert menu."

"Thanks, doll." I wave on my way out. Other than me asking customers if they need refills and the game on in the background, the

next two hours pass silently. As has been my go-to the past few months, I spend the quiet hours I work sketching in a sketchbook I bring with me. Afterall, I don't want to be a bartender the rest of my life. It's unobtrusive enough for the customers and the rest of the staff that no one minds.

"Tab, please," Hopper calls.

"Right on it." He pays, and I watch as he stands and practically falls back on the stool.

"Hopper," I gasp and rush around the bar to the other side. I had no idea he had gotten that drunk - I only gave him a handful of drinks.

"I'm fine," he says, standing with the help of a strong grip on the bar.

"Let me call someone for you."

"I'm fine," he repeats, more aggressively this time. I don't move out of his path, and when he goes to take a step, he stumbles, falling just far enough to end up leaning heavily on me. One of his hands has grabbed my shoulder, and I'm keeping him upright with two palms pressed against his chest. And trying very hard to keep my heart rate in check.

"Jim, sit down, damnit." I grab one of his thick arms and push him back towards a stool. "Let me take you home." His gaze jerks up from the floor to my face. "Drive you. Let me drive you home," I rephrase quickly. Talk about Freudian slips.

"No." I open my mouth to continue arguing, but he holds up a hand. "You can take me to the station."

"Alright. Let me grab my keys - wait here," I order. I head to the kitchen to grab my purse. "Marge, can you watch the bar for a few minutes? Hopper is completely sloshed - I'm going to drive him back to the station." She's said nothing, so I stop digging in my purse to look at her. Her eyebrows are raised nearly to her hairline. "What?" I add.

"I guess that's the service he deserves after all these tips," she says with a grin. "Sure thing. Just don't be gone too long or these folks and

I will have quite the rumor to spread," she threatens with a smile. I give her a glare that breaks into a smile and an eye roll.

"C'mon, let's go," I say, lifting Hopper by the arm and helping him to his feet. He leans so heavily on me on the way to my car, I'm struggling to stay upright. "Jesus, Hopper, you weigh a ton," I mutter in protest. I push him against the passenger door while I get the keys.

"No, can you drive mine? I'll have one of the officers drive you back," he slurs. I see his truck parked a few blocks away. That does make the most sense, but it'll be a pain.

"Alright, stay here. Keys?" He takes too long fumbling around in his coat pockets, so I reach my hand in myself and ignore the intimacy of the action. I hook a finger around the key ring and jog over to his truck. It takes me a minute to adjust the seat and the mirrors, and I spend that time constantly glancing back at my car to make sure Hopper has stayed put and remains upright.

I drive over and then have to get out, car left idling in the street, to help Hopper up. Once again, I get to press my body against his as I help him into the truck. He feels so...firm, so definitely an authority. It's been so long since I've really touched a man that I'm blowing this up like crazy in my head. Calm down, I berate myself.

When I reach across him to buckle the seatbelt, my hand brushes his hip as I click the buckle. I risk a glance at his face while I'm still just inches away, but he's looking past me, staring at the road, so I back away. I don't know why I keep holding out hope that one day he'll be interested in me.

The drive across town to the station is silent. When I pull up to the building, he insists I take him through the back. He stumbles as I'm helping him out of the truck, and I can't support his weight. We fall backwards, thankfully being caught by a police cruiser parked in the spot next to Hopper's truck. Although slightly jarred, I catch my breath at the feel of his body shoved against mine, and I actually mutter a *fuck* as one of his hands grabs hold of the car next to my shoulder and the other uses a hold on my waist to support himself as he gets to his feet.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"Don't worry about it," I answer. There really wasn't anything to be sorry about there.

I let him lean on me on our way to the door, one of his arms draped around my shoulders. If I wasn't on a time crunch and worried about Hopper's safety, this would be a dream come true. And if he was sober enough to actually know what he was doing.

He manages to unlock the door despite fumbling hands, and he directs me a few feet down the hall into his office. It's a relief and a loss when he lands in his chair; I'm glad I'm no longer supporting his weight, but the loss of contact with him is a travesty.

"Is there anything else you need?" He sighs heavily.

"Cal!" he shouts. I jump back in surprise. A few seconds later, one of the officers comes in.

"Jesus, Chief, what happened to you?"

"Drive this young woman wherever she asks, alright?" he says with a long-suffering tone. The officer looks me over with a question on his face, but just nods.

"Yes, sir. Right now?"

"Yes," he sighs and then waves to shoo us out of the room.

"So, Miss, where are we going?"

"Just to the center of town, please." He goes out the back and unlocks a cruiser, and I join him in the front. No way I'm sitting behind the bars.

"You drag the chief out of some dive bar?" he asks while starting the engine. I can't help but laugh, which results in him looking at me strangely.

"Something like that. I actually work at that dive bar," I explain. "I got him drunker than I realized, so I felt obligated to make sure he

left safely." This makes the man smile.

"That's the Chief for ya. You been here long? I don't believe I've made your acquaintance, and I know mostly everyone in this town."

"I moved here a little over half a year ago. And I'm glad to say I haven't had much reason to interact with the cops in that time. In an official capacity, at least. Hopper comes into the bar at least once a week," I add. My companion is quiet for some time.

"If you give him alcohol that often, someone should probably warn you about May, if no one has already." I'm riveted.

"No one has warned me, per say. I've heard just bits and pieces of gossip..." The officer sighs.

"Well, Chief had a little girl who died about four years ago now, born May 23rd. He always gets - Jesus - real bent out of shape all May, and you can bet he drinks like a fiend. He gets better after it's over, but you should know you'll probably have to deal with him more demanding than usual." At this point, we're a block from the bar with a red light for the intersection, so I get ready to get out.

"You can just drop me off here."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, thanks for the ride." I hop out and lightly jog back to the bar.

As usual, activity picks up after 5 PM, so I don't have much time to dwell on the events of today. But I...I touched him today, really touched him, for the first time. Sure, we'd brushed hands once or twice exchanging money, but there was never any *touching*. And now, I know pretty intricately how his body feels pressed against mine. That will be...useful material for my daydreams and actual dreams.

Even after I get home at two AM, my thoughts keep getting interrupted by flashes of the memory of his hand on my waist. It's a while before I'm able to go back to sleep.

6. The Second Touch

I don't open consecutive days, so it's not until 5 PM the next day that I am back at the bar. Lucy, the bartender who took care of the afternoon shift and that I'll be working with for the Thursday evening shift, greets me with an enigmatic statement.

"Your boyfriend came round lookin' for you today," she says in her Southern drawl. I spend a few seconds staring at her blankly, trying to figure out who she means.

"If you're talking about Steve, that's not funny." Steve is the local, slightly dementia-ed senior citizen, and he has a fondness for asking me on dates. But she's giving me a confused look now.

"No, not Steve; the Chief." My eyebrows shoot up.

"Oh. Oh - he's not my boyfriend," I hiss in hope the customers won't hear this awkward exchange. She just shrugs.

"Well, he was asking if you were working today, and clearly he wanted to talk to you."

"Are those the only requirements to be boyfriend/girlfriend now? I'll have to warn all my friends and family not to stop by," I tease. Of all my coworkers - actually, of everyone in Hawkins - I'm closest with Lucy. She's only a few years older than me, and we've worked a lot of shifts together.

"Ha, ha," she replies with a smile. "I just thought it was a little unusual, him askin' for you." I shrug.

"I don't disagree. I have no idea what that's about." I mean, he usually barely talks to me when I'm serving him - why would he bother coming down here just to talk? "Was he drunk?" I ask nearly a full minute later, so it takes her a few seconds to remember what I'm talking about.

"Nope, seemed sober. Especially for him," she adds. Very odd. Well, I'm sure he'll find me eventually. Thursday nights are the perfect

amount of busy to take away a fair amount of cash without being too hectic. I don't mind it being busy - it helps the shift pass a thousand times faster. But it also usually means no Hopper. He comes in only occasionally on the weekends. I have a theory it's because there are too many people who know him, so he can't just go off into a drunken haze, that instead he has to socialize. Some days he seems to enjoy it being conversational, but considering what I've learned recently about the impact May has on him, I think he'll be avoiding the crowds.

My prediction must have been right since he doesn't come in even though Lucy told him I was working later, and I work from open to close on Friday without seeing him. I don't work Saturdays, so when I leave for the night, I figure the soonest I'll find out what he wanted to talk about will be Sunday. But that turned out to be wrong.

"Wake up, honey, there's someone here to see you," my mom says while gently shaking me awake. I groan.

"What time is it?"

"It's one o'clock, so time to get up anyways." I mumble something about being up until 4:30 AM last night but sit up and stretch. She said someone was here to see me, but my freshly woken up brain can't fathom who that would be. I don't want to keep them waiting, and I figure it's just one of the managers or a neighbor so I tie my hair in a loose bun and wrap my favorite robe around my pjs, heading to the door. No one is waiting by the door or in the living room, which is odd - my mother is schooled in etiquette and wouldn't leave anyone waiting on the stoop, but I open the front door to check for this mysterious visitor.

"Hopper," I exclaim. How did he even know where to find me? He shifts his weight from side to side, spinning his hat in his hands.

"Sorry I woke you." Rather than his uniform, he's wearing an unbuttoned plaid shirt with a plain undershirt and blue jeans.

"No, it's fine. I- Do you want to come in?" I feel very underdressed in what amounts to pajamas and am wishing I had showered before I went to bed.

"No, no. I've already taken up too much of your time. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for what happened Thursday. I won't inconvenience you like that again." He then turns on his heel and strides back to his truck.

"Jim," I call after a few seconds of shocked silence. He stops walking, but he doesn't turn around. I skimp after him, my bare feet warmed by the cement, and I grab and tug on his arm, getting him to turn around. "I'm glad you're okay." I'm always surprised by our height difference when he's standing instead of sitting on a stool. I have to crane my neck to meet his gaze, and he's looking down at me skeptically. "You had me kind of worried," I elaborate. "And you weren't - it wasn't - an inconvenience. I..." I'm at a loss of how to explain that statement without revealing my emotions. "I don't mind helping people. And...and it's okay to need help sometimes. We all do." I watch his face for any reaction, but he's inscrutable. I realize my hand is still grabbing his bicep, and I let go hurriedly, trying not to blush. He's still looking into my eyes. Finally, he clears his throat and looks away.

"Thank you," he says quietly and stiffly. A smile spreads over my face. "You're welcome," I answer sincerely. He turns back around and walks away.

"Hopper," I call, getting him to stop and look back at me. "How did you know where I live?"

"Police magic," he says with a smile.

"Seriously, tell me!" I insist with a laugh. He shrugs, face growing serious.

"I have a knack...I tend to remember details, have trained myself to, actually. Turns out I memorized your license plate, so I had the DMV run it." He only saw the plate for ten seconds, maybe? And he memorized it while drunk? Damn.

"But that's registered to my father," I interject.

"Yeah, but I had a likely last name to go with your first. Then it was just a matter of finding the latest phone book."

"You make it sound so easy." I hope that statement conveys that I'm impressed.

"Once you know what to do, it pretty much is."

"And if you have perfect recall," I add. That gets what looks like a sincere smile from him. "I'll see you round, then?" He dips his chin once and then gets in his truck. I head back inside and face what will likely be an inquisition from my mother, but to my surprise she's rather mild.

"How do you know that police officer?" I note she distinctly avoided the word *man*.

"He comes into the bar a lot. There was an incident last night, and he was there, so he just stopped by to clarify my statement." Now, if she had been watching from the window, and I would bet my life that she was, our body language casts doubt on that story, but I'm hoping she was too distracted that a *man* came to visit her daughter to really scrutinize what was happening.

"Incident? What incident?" she cries. Good - attention successfully diverted from the sexy cop.

"It was nothing, Mom," I say in my best bored tone. "Two guys got too drunk and a fight broke out, but really, Mom, it was nothing. It lasted fifteen seconds before people broke it up. They probably won't even face charges." Thankfully, that placates her. She's been even more tightly wound since the divorce, but slowly she seems to be getting back to normal.

I spend the rest of my free time on the weekend in my bedroom/art studio working on a painting of the Lake Michigan. I'm working from memory and a photo I found in a magazine, so it's far from perfect, but I like to think I'm getting the essence of the place. Sunday morning, my mom knocks. "Yeah, come in." She sits on the bed. Is this going to be another lecture that art isn't a practical skill, and I should focus on becoming an accountant or a lawyer or some other deathly mundane career?

"I'm worried about you, honey." Oh, yep, definitely a lecture. I sigh

and put down my paintbrush, turning to her.

"Why?" I could start chewing her out, but I've been trying so hard to cut her slack.

"You spend so much time in here. You should be out with friends, enjoying the world." I swallow a retort about how I'm enjoying plenty in here, keeping myself in check with a bite on my tongue. "We've been here over six months, and you spend all your time alone. You had lots of friends back in the city-"

"Mom," I cut her off, "people are different here. I'm different. And there aren't, like, clubs where bored 20-somethings hang out and bond." Is there anything worse than your parent thinking you're a loser? "What about people who come into the bar?" she asks.

"They're all old! There just aren't that many people my age here. And even if there were, it's not that easy to get to know regulars," I think with one particular regular in mind. "But I'm fine," I assure her.

"I just," her voice cracks, "I know how much you liked the city, and I don't want you to feel like you have to be here, like I stole you away that or something. I know things were bad for a while, but I'm working now, and I'm back on my feet." I get up and wrap her in a hug.

"I like it here," I insist. "I like having free time. I like how quiet it is. I won't stay here forever, but I don't mind being here," I tell her. She is definitely doing better. Maybe I'll look into going to art school in the fall - my dad can foot the bill. I don't want to be a bartender my whole life, but I also know working a 9 to 5 and would make me want to blow my brains out. And being a housewife isn't for me. But maybe my mom is right about my social life needing resuscitation.

Of the many customers who have asked for my number, there's maybe two I would consider going on a date with, but there have been a few who have asked to set me up with a son or nephew of theirs. I had a few boyfriends back in the city, but I split with my last one when my mom and I moved. Maybe it's time to get back out there. I've only been refusing all offers due to this...ridiculous, unrequited crush on the Chief. And I think it's time to stop praying

he'll make a move. So, I promise myself that the next time someone asks to set me up, I'll let them.

Reviews are always appreciated! :)

7. The First Almost-Kiss

My opportunity to make good on my promise to let myself be set up happens sooner than I anticipated. That Sunday - Sundays are one of my favorite days because it's usually friends watching football games and playing pool: they drink a lot, but they're usually polite and not raucous like the weekend parties are - one of the middle-aged men watching the game with his friends asks for my number.

"Sorry, I don't give my number out." I issue my standard response with a forced smile.

"Oh, no, not for me! I'm happily married. My son is coming back from his junior year of college soon, and you're a pretty, nice young lady. Thought he could take you to a movie, is all," he says with a pleasant smile. The man has pretty brown eyes, and he's not portly, so I'm not...opposed per se.

"Oh, that is a little different," I say with a teasing smile. The problem: Hopper is in tonight. And I just - I do feel like we've actually gotten closer the past couple of days (or maybe it's me pretending because I know more about him now than just his first and last name and occupation), and I don't want to potentially throw him off by accepting to date a stranger if he is now thinking... Jesus Christ, get a hold of yourself, I scold.

"He's 21 then?" I ask. The man nods. "When he comes home, have him stop by," I say with a wink as I finish refilling their mugs of beer.

"Break another heart?" Lucy teases as I get back behind the bar to make more mixed drinks.

"No, not yet at least," I tease back. She steps close to me to grab the bottle of booze I just set down.

"You should have seen the look on Hopper's face when you didn't say no to that man." I freeze and look at her, dead serious.

"What was the look?" My heart is pounding.

"Not happy," she whispers. I give her a stare.

"That's his usual expression," I hiss. She shakes her head, and she's still serious, so I pay attention.

"It wasn't like that though." Before she can elaborate more, a customer waves her over for a refill. I shouldn't inquire about this right now anyways, with him sitting not 15 feet away. So I smile and go about my business.

About ten minutes later, Hopper is empty, and I make sure to get to him right away.

"Need a refill?"

"Not right now. I'll wave you over if that changes."

"Alright." I shouldn't be disappointed, this shouldn't feel like a rejection...jesus. But he doesn't get a refill for over an hour. But he also doesn't leave until closing, just smoking and watching TV. It's thirty minutes after we've locked up that the staff can go home, and I counted the cash register so I'm one of the lasts to leave.

I'm walking to my car when I notice Hopper's truck is still in the parking lot. The back of my mind is worried he was too hammered to drive. It's a cold evening despite being on the far side of the month, and I didn't bring my jacket.

"Tricia," a deep voice says behind me. I scream and whip around, dropping my keys.

"Oh, Hopper, it's just you," I sigh, one hand pressed against my pounding heart.

"Sorry I startled you." He's slurring pretty heavily. Lucy served Hopper too tonight, so although I personally only gave him a few drinks, she spent a lot more time serving people at the bar than I did. No wonder he stopped drinking but didn't leave - he couldn't drive.

"You alright, Chief?" I try to make my voice as soft as possible so he knows I don't consider this an imposition.

"It's May 18th," he says, swaying. I guide him so he's leaning against the side of my car.

"Yeah," I say gently. I wonder if he's assuming someone has told me the significance of this, or if he's just so far gone he's basically babbling.

"I shouldn't take advantage of how nice you are." He makes to turn away, but I block him, putting two hands on his wide chest to keep him in place. He's drunk enough that I'm easily able to overpower him enough to keep him against the car.

"Asking for help isn't taking advantage," I insist. "Why did you come over?" Those blue eyes look into mine, looking so lost. He opens his mouth, but it's a few seconds before words come out.

"I'm too drunk to drive. Usually I would just sleep in my car or risk it," my eyes widen in fear and horror, "but you're here, so I figured I could be a drunk asshole and take advantage of your kind nature. That's why I came over."

"Okay, you need help getting in the car?" He looks at me blankly.

"But, you can't. You need to go home. You've been working, and I'm sure you're tired..."

"I like being up late. It's one of the perks of the job. You didn't answer my question." I cross my arms.

"I guess the station isn't that far," he mutters.

"The station? What? I'm going to drive you home."

"No, no, no. I live far - can't ask you to do that. Station is closer, and then when I'm sober, I can get one of the guys to drive me to pick up my truck." I admit the plan is reasonable, but the thought of this grieving man sleeping at his desk is too depressing.

"How about you get in the car, and then we figure this out?" Slowly, he nods and shambles to the passenger side. It takes me a minute to find my keys on the ground and get the doors unlocked, and then I'm sitting with Hopper in my car. It feels stupidly domestic.

I can't take him back to my house, which unfortunately is the best option - he could sleep on the couch, and it's a short drive back here for him to get his truck and drive to work in the morning. But I can't really bring a man into my mother's house without at least telling her first. She might die of fright if she saw a strange man sleeping on the couch before I had the chance to tell her we had a visitor.

He says his place is far, and the problem is that if I drive him there and then go home, he'll be stranded. He could call for one of his officers to drive him, but I have a suspicion he doesn't want to do that. And I can't exactly invite myself to stay the night and then drive him into town in the morning. And even if he offered that solution, that just seems too...too much. I don't think my heart could handle it. And I might get stupid in the situation and come on to him. And my mother would lose her mind if she woke up and realized I wasn't home, and my missing car would be sure to clue her in.

We both look at each other in unison: I think we were each puzzling through the situation with similar conclusions.

"If I drop you at the station, you won't be able to shower, change clothes, sleep comfortably." He shrugs.

"I've done it plenty of times. Once more isn't going to kill me." I hesitate. "If you drop me off at home, there are all sorts of questions when I ask Cal or Powell to pick me up."

"Questions like?" I prompt. He holds his head in his hands and sighs.

"Like who dropped me off. It's suspicious," he adds. I think I'm still missing something. He must think so too since he makes a few vulgar gestures to convey what he's trying to avoid saying.

"I see," I say face flushed. I think. "But can't those same questions be asked at the station?"

"Yes, but it's a lot less incriminating than my house." I see no other option, so I concede.

"Alright." I start driving, but halfway there I get lost since everything looks different in the dark and I've only come this way once before,

the first time I dropped him off.

"Left," he calls, hat pulled over his eyes. How he has any idea is a mystery to me, but I trust what he's proved are killer instincts. And, miraculously, he manages to direct me the rest of the way to the station. I park at the back. The place looks deserted - no lights on, and just a few empty police cruisers parked in front. This is most alone I've been with Hopper since, well, ever. Don't think like that, I chide. It's not right - he's in desperate need of help and all I can think about is trying to get underneath him.

"We're here, Hopper." I get out and move to his side to help him out. There's a lot less climbing involved from my sedan, but he stumbles all the same, and I can't hold him up. He falls to the gravel lot. "Shit," I mutter. That probably hurt - poor guy.

"C'mon," I crouch down and try to hoist him up, but he's like a sack of potatoes. Why isn't he helping me get him up?

"You can just leave me here," he mumbles.

"Yeah, I know, we're at the station, upsie-daisy."

"I'll be fine here," he repeats, and I realize he literally means the parking lot. I have a horrible vision of an early arriver not seeing Hopper's prone body and...

"Hell no. Get up, you're going inside." He just settles himself down on the stones. I sigh. "Fine, then." I lay down next to him, wincing at the many sharp edges.

"No, no. Tricia, go home," he orders, but slurred and spoken to the ground, it's a lot less impactful than his demands usually are.

"Not until you get inside."

"Just leave me here. I'm so tired. It's what I deserve," he whispers so low I barely catch it. My heart hitches to my throat. This poor man.

"Hopper, you are a good person and a great man. Please, let me help you inside." I grab the hand closest to me to emphasize my point, and I feel a warm, wetness. "Jim, you're bleeding," I exclaim. He barely

stirs in response. "Please, Jim, get up," I plead. From the dim starlight, I can see a glimmer of wetness of his cheeks as he turns his face. My breath catches - he's been crying. "Please," I say once more, getting to my knees and extending my hand. With a sigh and a groan, he pushes himself up. If this is how he is on May 18th, I don't know if I'm going to be able to do anything for May 23rd-Jim.

With lots of heaving, I am able to get him to the back door, and he is able to unlock the door after a few minutes of fumbling that I spent panicked we'd be locked out and have to abandon this plan.

By the time we're inside, I'm shivering from the cold. It's rather nice to get to press against Hopper and take some of his body heat while I guide him to his desk. In the light, I can see scrapes on one hand and a pretty deep gash on the other palm. He's also got a cut on his eyebrow that's causing a trail of blood down the side of his face.

"Where's a first-aid kit?" His eyes are fluttering closed, so I snap my fingers a few times to get him to focus.

"Down the hall, supply closet." It's creepy being in a deserted building, so I hurry with the task, bringing back the blue metal box. Hopper clearly needs to sleep, so I pull up a chair and try to work as quickly as possible. His first hand is easy, just dragging an alcohol wipe across the scrapes. The second I wrap in gauze, hoping that will do the job. Then, I use another wipe on the cut on his eyebrow and to clean up the blood on his face, and I apply pressure with a square of gauze. That seems to rouse him from his doze. His eyes look a little clearer than before, but with that clarity comes more pain.

One of his large hands moves up to where I'm keeping the gauze, his fingers brushing and briefly entangling with mine.

"I fell?"

"Yeah," I answer. We speak in whispers despite there being no one else around - it just seems fitting.

"You've got a pretty bad cut on your left hand, this little wound, and some scrapes on your right hand." He sighs.

"Could be worse."

"Yeah." To my surprise, he doesn't hurry me away or bluster. He lets me keep pressure on his wound while he unwraps the gauze on his left hand. "Probably don't need stitches," he mutters and replaces the gauze with a big band-aid. "It'll better apply pressure," he explains.

"I see," I say in an effort to keep him talking. He's a lot chattier than usual, and I think that might be a sign he wants to talk, but also I don't want to push. Especially if that would make his pain worse. There's so much I want to say, but I don't think any of it would make a difference. "You're...very strong," I finally say. Those deep blue eyes swing up to meet mine. Suddenly, I realize just how close I am to him - our legs are inches from brushing, my face is less than a foot from his. Should I move farther away? I can't bring myself to.

"Why would you say that?" He's almost accusatory, as if suspecting a joke.

"Because you...fight. You keep fighting. Not everyone would, and you do. I don't want to impose or intrude, but I know that...grief," I whisper and see a flicker of pain across his face, "is awful. And it's strong of you to continue facing it." He looks away from me, down at his injured hands that hang in his lap.

"I don't know if stumbling through life with pills and alcohol count as 'facing it'." His voice is weary. Am I actually seeing the real Jim Hopper? The one free from facades and guardhouses?

"Everyone copes in their own ways. It can take a long time to process things. I know it doesn't even begin to compare," cat's out the bag already that I know, "but when my grandmother passed away, I was a wreck. I could barely eat for months. I would cry inconsolably for hours. I planned on going to college, but I couldn't leave home." He moves his gaze back to mine, and there's something new in them now, but for the life of me, I can't name it. I glance away, suddenly self-conscious. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm babbling like this. I shouldn't burden you-"

"You're not," he says, cutting me off. His right hand moves to meet the hand I still have on his forehead. I stay perfectly still. He moves

his fingers, then, down my hand, my wrist, my forearm, up my elbow, my upper arm. I fight not to shiver at the feeling of his fingers, what can only be described, as caressing me, touching me skin-to-skin. His hand moves from my shoulder to my chin, where they tip my head up slightly, bringing my eyes to meet his. Is that desire I see in his eyes? I part my lips so slightly and am rewarded to see his gaze dip down to look at them. When he flicks his eye back up, there's definitely desire there. My heart soars, and my breathing quickens. I move my head fractionally closer to his.

"You need to go," he says, voice hard again. He looks away from me, withdrawing his hand. I swallow hard and stand, trying not to show any sign of disappointment.

"Right. Here." I pull the gauze away from his eyebrow and then tape the tiniest bandaid I can find over the wound.

"The door will lock behind you," he informs me.

"Take care, Hopper," I call from the doorway. The whole drive home, I try not to think about it, I can't. I should have known better than to reveal myself. "Fuck," I scream to myself while stopped at a redlight. "Fuck, fuck fuck!" If I'm lucky, maybe he won't remember it. But I doubt I'll be so lucky.

8. The Conversation

A/N: Hopper will be a little out of character for this chapter because of how drunk he gets.

It seems that not only did Hopper remember what I tried to do, he hated it. And I suppose I don't blame him - what was I thinking, trying to make a move on a grieving father who was confiding in me as a friend? I haven't seen him since I left the police station so early on Monday morning. It's now Friday, the day before his daughter's birthday. I sigh. I really fucked up.

I would be repulsed by me too, in his place. I start to trust someone, show them vulnerability, and it turns out that they were only being so nice to me because they wanted me? I would hate that person. I mean, I would have helped him out even if I wasn't attracted to him, but he doesn't know that. And if I'm being honest, I certainly wouldn't have been nearly as willing to do so.

But I'm also very worried. He's had a really bad couple of days. Since he's not asking me for rides, is he driving? He isn't coming into the bar, so he's drinking somewhere else, somewhere where someone might over-serve him without a thought. In my desire to help him, I ended up putting him entirely out of my protection.

I can't stop kicking myself for that stupid fucking lean in. If I hadn't done that, Hopper wouldn't hate me. Hell, I think I was getting close to actually being able to help him get *better* instead of just enabling his unhealthy coping. The least I can do is apologize, and I definitely will, but not until June, at least.

Despite the bar being packed, the shift drags by. Each time the door swings open, my heart jumps to my throat with hope it will be Hopper, and each time it sinks lower than before when it inevitably is not him. When I finally make it home, I collapse into bed, regret and sadness my now-familiar companions.

The next morning, my mom wakes me.

"Tricia, work is calling for you," my mom calls into my bedroom.

With a groan, I kick off my covers and head to the kitchen where the phone is. I clear my throat before I answer, trying to clear the sleep from my voice.

"Hello?"

"Tricia, you need to get down here right away," Alex, one of the managers, says.

"Why, did Linda not come in?" He is asking me to take up a shift today, and I *really* do not want to do that. I need a goddamn break.

"No, everyone is here. But so is Hopper." My heart pounds at his name. He's paused as if that statement explains everything.

"So? I'm not the only person who can serve him." I can't believe he woke me up for this.

"I don't think you understand," he whispers. "He's absolutely sloshed, and he keeps asking if you're working today, saying he needs to talk to you."

"How sloshed?" What exactly is going on? Why does he want to talk to me - yell at me for being disgusting and immoral? Well, so be it. And I'm not going to pass up the chance that he wants to actually talk to me.

"Like he double-parked out front and his ability to stand up is questionable. And his ability to speak below a shout."

"Is he still drinking?"

"Yeah-"

"Alex!" I scold.

"If we didn't serve him, he said he would leave," he exclaims.

"Jesus. Alright, I'll come by, but not to work, just to try to get him a bit more stable." I'm about to hang up. "Oh, and, Alex, for the love of God, take his damn keys."

"What was that about?" my mom asks, peeking her head in the kitchen. I'm frantically making toast and washing an apple.

"I need to go into work." I try to add an explanation, but I'm trying to limit how much I lie to her.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just need to help take care of one of the customers who got a little unruly."

"Why do they need you to do that? Shouldn't they just call the police?" It's a reasonable question.

"The customer isn't very...I'm the best at handling him, is all. And we want to handle the situation delicately. He's a good customer." I leave the kitchen to get dressed, throwing on jeans and a Blondie t-shirt and my worn converse.

"Okay." I can hear the hesitation in her voice. "When will you be back?"

"What's with the third-degree, Mom? Didn't you want me going out and being independent?" I tease. She huffs.

"I'm a little concerned by this situation. And you're being...shifty."

"I am not," I feverently deny.

"Well, when will you be back?"

"I don't know, Mom," I say, exasperated. "This could take a while." I make to move to the bathroom, but she blocks my way. "Look, I'll call you from the bar when I know more."

"Alright," she concedes, letting me by.

"Who is this customer, anyways?" I freeze mid-toothbrushing, but I recover quickly.

"You don't know him," I say as casually as I'm able.

"I'd like to know his name, at least, in case I ever meet him."

"It's Jim," I answer around my toothbrush.

"Jim what?" I'm rinsing when she asks, so I have a few seconds to think.

"You know, I've never actually caught his last name." I feel a little obligated to preserve the Chief's dignity...and I can't bring myself to completely forego the possibility, however stupidly remote, of my mother approving of him. I grab my purse and the toast and apple to eat on the way and head out.

As I pull up to the bar, I see what Alex meant about "double parked" - Hopper's very distinct truck is slanted the wrong way for the angled parking spaces. I don't care if it will make him hate me more - I will be giving him an earful about getting behind the wheel the second he's sober. But I'll be fixing that parking job ASAP to prevent the entire town from seeing it.

The second I walk in, I spy him slumped against the bar. And I notice the place is unfortunately populated, with everyone keeping about a radius of five feet from Hopper.

"Keep an eye on the bar, I'm going to fix the truck," Alex whispers as I walk over. I nod. He's probably more worried about the parking space being blocked than appearances, but hey, whatever gets the job done.

"Jim?" He starts, whipping around, his hand falling to his holster. Alright, priority number one is getting a loaded gun away from him.

"Oh, Tricia! There you are. Where have you been?"

"I don't usually work Saturdays," I explain. "Where have you been?"

"Passed out, mostly." He takes another swig of his drink, draining it. I make a silent plea that he won't ask for another, and thankfully he doesn't.

"Alex said you were asking to talking to me?" I brave the topic and brace myself for a torrent of rage.

"Oh, right. Can we go some place quieter?"

"Yeah, of course. Have you eaten?" He furrows his brow.

"I don't know. Possibly not. You been to Benny's yet?"

"I don't think so."

"They've got great burgers. You're driving though." He gathers his hat and throws some bills on the counter. He sways as he gets up, and I grab his shirt sleeve in an attempt to keep him upright.

"Easy there," I warn as he staggers to the door. Alex tosses me Hopper's confiscated keys as we leave. In the car, it takes him over a minute to get his seatbelt buckled, but after what happened the last time I got a little too forward, I want to give him plenty of space so he knows I'm not coming on to him. "You know how to get there?"

"Yeah," he grumbles as he lights up.

"Open the window, please."

"Yes, ma'am," he says around the cigarette. Right up here." Other than directions, the rest of the ride he's quiet. He leads me to a greasy-looking diner, but this is definitely in line with what I know of Hopper's tastes. "Do you need help?" I ask as we leave the car, but he ignores me, stumbling around on his own.

"Benny!" Hopper calls loudly as he enters. A burly man looks up from the table he was serving with an expression of surprise and walks over to greet us.

"Hopper, hey, man, how you doing?" It takes him a second to notice me, and when he does, he looks me over. "I don't believe we've met, name's Benny," he says, hand outstretched. I shake it.

"I figured as much," I say with a smile. "I'm Tricia."

"Nice to meet you. What can I do for you two?"

"A table and a beer for now. Tricia, you want anything?"

"Just water for me."

As Benny leads us to a table away from the other guests (good - we're going to need some privacy with Hopper like this), Hopper starts to fall again, and Benny helps stabilize him. It's a relief to have someone muscular to help with that task.

Once we're seated, Benny heads back to the other table.

"You said that your grief knocked you out for a bit." That was abrupt. I nod. "How did you get over it, you know. I'm assuming you are since you're thinking about going to art school."

"How do you know that?"

"Heard you talkin' bout it with Harriet." Oh, yeah, I guess I did mention that. He really has trained himself to pay attention to every detail.

"Oh, right. And yeah, yeah, I did get over the worst of it. I still miss her, of course, but it's not the same soul-crushing thing."

"So, how?" he prompts. I think for a few seconds.

"Time, obviously, but that's sort of...anyways, I also found that finding little ways to honor her in my daily life made it easier to move on." Benny comes over with our drinks.

"A burger for myself and, Tricia, you too?"

"Do you have anything vegetarian?" I ask with doubt. I notice Hopper makes a face as he takes a sip of his beer.

"Eh," Benn scratches the back of his neck. "I can get you some fries?"

"That'll be fine." With a backward glance, he leaves us to our conversation.

"What do you do? To honor her," he adds at my confusion.

"Oh, well, she really liked candles, and so do I. So every time I light a candle, it makes me think of her. I wear a ring of hers," I hold up my

right hand to show the gold band on my ring finger. "It helps me think of her and feel close to her. And I try to live my life like she would advise me to: taking no shit from anyone and being kind to others. When things get tough, sometimes I sort of talk to her," I admit, playing with the wrapper on my straw.

"How?"

"I mean, not literally. I just think about driving around with her, like we would do when I was younger and was fighting with my mom or dad. And I tell her about what's going on, and I imagine what she would say. It's sort of silly, but it helps." He grunts.

"It doesn't sound silly. It sounds nice." There is a long moment of silence; I want to ask him about his daughter, but I don't want to make him feel worse. "Your grandma, she sounds like a wise lady."

"She was," I say with a sad smile, surprised that tears are welling up in me. I wipe them away, embarrassed to have shown that emotion to Hopper. "Like I said, I still miss her." There's a strange expression on his face, almost like relief.

"When my daughter, Sarah, died, people always would say *time, time time*. I suppose they meant well. But it's been time. It's been *years*, and it's still just as raw." I reach for him, laying my hand on his before I can stop myself, but he doesn't pull away.

"Yeah. And it doesn't help that people seem to expect, you know, that after two, maybe three, weeks, you're back to normal."

"Exactly!" He slams his mug down, spending droplets of beer flying. I move my hand off his to wipe off my skin and the table. "Sorry," he mutters.

"It deserves the emphasis," I say with a smile. "I think that makes it worse, even. Not just not having the space to mourn, but the *expectation* that you should be fine. Makes it harder to reach out and be supported." Before he has the chance to respond, Benny delivers our food. But based on the shining expression on his face, that resonates with him.

"Everything look good?"

"Yessir. Another beer though." Benny looks at me for confirmation on this order. I just shrug - so long as Hopper's not throwing up, he can keep drinking.

"Coming right up, Hop." Hopper slides the near-empty mug back and forth across his side of the table, and then twists it in his hands.

"Was it sudden?" he asks. I shrug.

"Sort of. She was hospitalized with what we thought was pneumonia but turned out to be lung cancer. At that point it was too late to do anything, and she passed away a few weeks later. So we knew it was coming, but it all happened faster than we thought." I swallow hard.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be making you talk about this-"

"You're not making me, and it's good to talk about. My mom and her weren't particularly close, so even she's tired of talking about this now. I like remembering her, sharing her memory with others." I wait to see if he'll start talking about his daughter, but he just takes a bite of his burger.

"Those blue bands you wear - they were Sarah's?" I venture. He freezes for a second, and I'm worried I've pushed him, but then he sets his burger down and nods.

"Yeah. Her hair ribbons. It's like you said - it keeps them on your mind." I eat my fries, giving him space to talk. I feel like he's close to - "For us, it wasn't that sudden. It was...drawn out. She was in the hospital for months, fighting. She had the best of care, but it just wasn't enough." He swallows and downs the rest of his beer, and I get the feeling he's trying not to cry. "It was obvious she wasn't getting better, but I couldn't give up hope. It hurt like hell to see her suffer, and I was terrified each time we visited it would be the last, but I still wasn't ready when it happened." I reach my hand out again - he didn't seem to mind before, and it makes me feel like I'm doing *something* to help him. When he speaks again, his voice is even deeper and gravelier than usual.

"Diane, my ex, she was more prepared for it. I think for her, even though Sarah was now gone, it was easier. There was something concrete to mourn, and the tortuous anticipation was done. But I just couldn't," his voice cracks. He might not be crying, but I'm close to crying for him. "I couldn't wrap my head around her being gone." I squeeze his hand. I wish I could hold him in my arms, but he'd hate that. "There was just this awful loss."

"It probably wasn't easy, processing it all differently than your wife." His eyes go distant.

"Yeah. I sure put her through a lot," he sighs and looks around for more beer. He looks behind me for Benny, and a few seconds later Benny brings the second mug over. Seconds later it's near-empty. He wipes the foam away with the back of his hand. "She had to deal with my baseless optimism the whole time Sarah was in the hospital while she had already come to terms with reality."

"And then I...I wasn't there for Diane, after Sarah died. It hurt too much to see her. She looked so much like Sarah. And I couldn't stand how...resilient she was - it seemed like she didn't care. I mean, I see now that taking care of things, keeping our lives from falling apart, it helped her. She coped by keeping living while I was drinking away my paychecks and gambling what I didn't drink. Believe it or not, I used to be worse than this," he says with a dark smile as he finishes the rest of the beer. He then gestures to Benny for another.

"Would it help to tell me about her?"

"Who?"

"Sarah," I clarify. His gaze goes glassy again, and I know he's far away. He's quiet for a long time, I figure the answer is no, but then he starts talking, and he doesn't stop. He tells me about her smile, her laugh. How smart she was; how she wanted to know everything about dinosaurs and stars and animals. He tells me about the park near their house where they would play, about the vacation they took to the lake and how she asked him questions about the waves until he had to promise to get her a book on it when they got home. He tells me about how she would jump up and down in excitement when he got home, or they went to get ice cream, or they started watching

her favorite movie.

As he talks, he'll gesture wildly or beam at a pleasant memory of her intelligence or kindness or silliness. He makes me laugh, he makes me have to hold back tears, he makes me desperately wish I could bring his daughter back.

"She sounds wonderful," I tell him after he downs another beer, his eyes going distant again. "And it sounds like she was blessed with wonderful parents." He looks at me with a sharper pain than I've seen before - whoops. Looks like I unintentionally hit on something. I lean in. "I mean that, Hopper. I really do."

"Thank you," he mutters and gestures for another beer. Hours have passed, and the sky is growing pink, but I don't want to say goodbye. And I don't want him to be alone.

"Jim, just so you know, we close in thirty. Now I'm happy to let you stay-"

"No, you don't need to trouble yourself. Tricia should be going home soon anyways. I've kept her captive here long enough. What do I owe you?" Hopper stands, so I do too. But I can see that the sadness has settled on him just as deeply as before, so there's no way I'm leaving him just yet.

"It's on the house," the man just as big as Hopper replies.

"Benny, c'mon-"

"Jim, I said it's on the house." For doing someone a favor, he's being rather firm about it, but I suppose it's because he knows Hopper is going to be reluctant to accept. And I'm not at all surprised when Hopper throws \$30 down before Benny can object.

"I'll have drunk you broke otherwise," he argues and heads for the door, linking his arm with mine. Benny just sighs loudly.

"Take care, Hopper."

Back in the car, Hopper sighs heavily. "You mind stopping at Big Buy before you drop me off? I'm out of booze."

"That's fine, just direct me."

We get to the store, Hopper managing to keep on his feet the whole way inside. He heads directly for the beer aisle while I trail behind, ready to catch him if need be. Thankfully the store isn't too crowded right now, so only a few people are witnessing their Chief of Police staggering around. Unsurprisingly, we garner quite a few stares, but it isn't until Hopper is checking out his three six-packs that I realize more people are staring at *me* than him. I whip out my compact, checking if I have ketchup all over my face or something, but there is nothing out of place on my face. Well, that's rather odd, but before I can dwell on it too much I have to help Hopper in the car.

And then he directs me to his place, and I can barely believe this isn't a dream. Are these ideal circumstances? No way. But it's become clear that he doesn't hate me, which is a relief. And I've learned my lesson not to come on to him no matter how much I want to.

We keep driving farther from Hawkins until we're on a dirt road without another house in view. I pull up to a trailer home parked right on a lake. The sun is just peeking above the horizon, casting a beautiful twilight around the area.

"This place is beautiful," I tell him while he's grabbing his beers.

"Thanks. I'll see you round," he says without a backward glance.

"Hopper," I say, hurrying out of the car. "Let me help you in." I'm realizing I probably should have put a cap on how much beer he was buying. He could easily drink himself dead with all this and the state he's already in. Amazingly, he doesn't object.

I hope you enjoyed this latest chapter! Reviews help keep me motivated and are always appreciated!

9. The Dance

A/N: My thanks to the guest reviewer who inspired me to get the latest chapter up! I try to publish once a week on Fridays, but I will probably have to go on a bit of a hiatus due to school and personal life demands. I appreciate every follow/review/etc. so much! :)

The Dance

I can't help but stare openly at his place as I walk through the door, a case of beer in my hands. It's small but not cramped, but it's a complete mess. I can't count the empty beer cans – no wonder he's got a few pounds to spare. I follow him into the kitchen and set my case on top of the other two. The intimacy of being in his home isn't lost on me, but I know he doesn't feel the same way.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" I can see the hesitation flicker across his face before his gruff, tough guy mask comes back.

"Yeah, absolutely. Peachy." He fishes out his cigarette pack.

"I don't mind staying, really. We can," I look around for some excuse to stay, "play cards," I say, grabbing the deck on his counter. His vacillating is visible, but there's still four hours until midnight, and I'll be damned if he spends them wallowing. "C'mon, it'll be fun."

"What game do you know with just two people?" he asks while opening one of his beers.

"War, blackjack" I say with a shrug.

"Let's do war - less brain power," he finally says. I beam at him and sit down at the kitchen table, clearing away some of the empty cans. I cut the deck, and we start playing. I want to talk, but I don't know if I should ask about his daughter or if bringing her up would make him feel worse, so I decide to take the approach of distraction.

"Did you always want to be a cop?" He looks up from the cards.

"Pretty much, yeah...Did you always want to be a bartender?" I laugh.

"No, but it's not too bad of a gig."

"I've seen you draw - do you make any other art?" Before I answer, the phone rings. He doesn't move. "Should you get that?"

"No, it's probably just someone checking on me. I don't want to talk to them." Well, I can't argue with that since it's up to him. And I can't help but feel elated that he *does* seem to want to talk to me.

"I paint, too. And I'll do ink washes, but I'm not very good at that yet. I also want to give pastels and charcoal more of a try, but the supplies near by are more craftsy than fine art. So until I make a trip into the city, I'm sticking with more conventional mediums."

"You go back to the city often?"

"About once a month I'll drive up, see some friends. And my dad still lives there, and I'm trying not to completely hate him for what he did."

"God, parents. They're a real minefield." The phone rings again.

"You sure you shouldn't answer that?"

"I'm sure. If the noise bothers you, you can just unplug it." That would make whoever is trying to reach him frantic, I'm sure, so I shake my head.

"Do you ever go back?"

"Not if I can avoid it," he answers in a clipped tone. I guess he's talked out because he just keeps asking about me. I don't mind answering, and it feels sort of flattering, like he actually wants to know about me. The fifth time the phone rings, he whips around in his chair and answers it.

"Yes?" I can just make out some squawking from the phone. "This is Jim Hopper, who's this?" That's odd - a wrong number? "Is your daughter Tricia?" My eyes go wide, and I freeze. "Then yeah, she's here. You want to talk to her?" He passes me the phone. I slowly reach out.

"Hello?"

"Jesus Christ, where the hell have you been? Why didn't you call me from the bar?"

"I'm sorry, it was sort of a crisis situation."

"Who *exactly* is this man you're with? This drunkard that you had to pull out of the bar-"

"Mom," I try cutting her off, but she just keeps ranting. I stand with a mouthed "I'm sorry," walking as far away as the cord will let me.

"You thought I wouldn't know? Why are you keeping this sort of company? Look, I know things have been rough lately, and I guess I'm partly to blame for all this, but this has gotten out of hand. My god, is this the same man who came by the house? Is *that* who you ran off with?" she sneers. "Jeez, Tricia, of all the drunks, you couldn't pick one a little younger and who shaves from time to time?"

"Mom, that's enough!" I yell, which finally makes her shut up. "I am *sorry* that I did not remember to call you. But for the love of God, I am twenty-four years old, and I don't need your approval every time I go out. And I certainly," I lower my voice to a hiss, "don't need your approval of whom I choose to spend time with." In the silence that results from my retort, I exclaim, "How did you even know where to call?"

"I called your work when you didn't call me, and they told me who you dragged out of the bar and that maybe I should call his place. You know what that young man said on the phone to me? He said 'Try Hopper's place in thirty minutes or so - I doubt they'll pick up the phone any sooner than that'. And I have been calling *all day*."

"Mom, it's not like that," I hiss. "We went to a restaurant, that's why I didn't call you. Alex was just kidding." I'm going to kill Alex - he spends so much time in the bar he forgets not everyone appreciates offhand dirty insinuations.

"Oh, I'm *sure*. I want you home right now."

"What?" I sputter. "No way. I'm twenty four, not fourteen; you can't

tell me when to come home." She sighs heavily. I hope that means she realizes how out of line she's been.

"Then when are you coming home?"

"I don't know. When I feel like it. Goodbye." I walk back to the kitchen and slam the phone down. "Gah!" I yell, forgetting Jim's presence in my anger. Then I sense him behind me, and he lays a hand on my lower back. I fight a shiver at the contact.

"That didn't sound great."

"It wasn't. Minefield, right?" I sigh.

"You want to talk about it?" I bite the inside of my cheek. I do, god, I haven't had anyone to talk to, really *talk* to since we moved here. But today should be about him, I don't want to burden him. "Hey, you listened to me for long enough today. Let me return the favor." He moves his hands to my shoulders, and I realize how tense I was holding them. Under his touch, I relax them down with an exhale of the anger I was holding. I turn to face him.

"I would like to talk about it."

"Grab a beer and talk." At my hesitation, he adds, "Besides, you're not about to drive home anytime soon, are you?" I grin.

"No way." I crack one open and sip - not too bad. "Can we go outside?" In my little venture to the other room I spotted a porch facing the water. He nods and leads the way.

"Wow," I gasp once we're outside. "There's even more stars out here," I marvel. He's walked to the bannister, leaning against it, so I join him.

"So, your mom," he says while lighting a cigarette.

"Yeah, my mom." I take a swig of the beer. "She means well, she's just...she's been through a lot, I shouldn't be so hard on her."

"She sounded plenty hard on you, from what I could hear." That makes me smile a little.

"I guess, yeah. I don't like pushing back on her though since..." I trail off but then remember the whole point of this is to be open and share. "She faded pretty hard after the divorce. Like, she wasn't really *here* for a few months. She couldn't go grocery shopping, wasn't applying for any jobs, didn't cook or clean...she could barely shower and brush her hair and stuff. She's a lot better now, but I'm afraid that-that if I talk back to her or fight with her that I'll send her back to that state. And I really don't want that." I take a long drink.

"The child taking care of their parent...now that's hard," he says while looking out across the lake.

"It is. I felt - I feel - so under qualified, I suppose is the best word, to do so."

"You must have done something right if she's back to yelling at you for not being home early enough." That makes me laugh. I look up at him, glad he's looking away from me so I don't have to conceal my affection.

"Let's hope." He breathes his cigarette deeply. I pretend to be looking at the moon when really I'm admiring him.

"Do you like it here?" he asks, not looking at me. I stammer.

"Here? I mean, yeah, yes, it's very peaceful and remote."

"No, sorry, Hawkins. Do you like Hawkins?" I relax at the less-charged question.

"Oh, yeah, it's alright. I prefer being able to order takeout past 9 PM, but hey, nowhere is perfect," I say with a smile as he turns to look at me.

"Really, though." I frown, answering more seriously.

"It's slow - I don't mind that. It's nice going slow, having time to relax and not worry about what's happening around the world. But also I like...I like to explore, and in Hawkins there isn't all that much to explore. Nowhere in Indiana, really. But Indianapolis is a little better, with the museums and eclectic restaurants." He nods, blowing smoke up to the sky.

"Yeah, I kinda figured this wasn't your speed. You're too smart." My eyebrows shoot up at the compliment. "That can make it hard to relate to us country folk."

"You-you think I'm smart?" There's a smile creeping over my face despite my efforts to fight it.

"Yeah, absolutely. I mean, number one, that vocabulary. You've made so many customers stop dead when you use a word way above their pay grade." I blush - I didn't realize I did that.

"Oops," I laugh. I breathe in the clean air and take in the owl calls and smile. "Well, what about for you? You're smarter than I am, after all." He scoffs at that. I finish my can of beer. He breathes deeply.

"I like Hawkins. I couldn't cut it anywhere else, I don't think. My biggest worries are usually mailboxes being smashed and whether Big Buy is going to run out of whiskey and TV dinners." I snicker at that. I wonder if he gets back on his feet a bit more if he'll long for something more. But today of all days is definitely not the time to ask him that. "I grew up here, so I have friends from my high school days that are still around. It's easier to relate to people when you have a history even if you don't see eye to eye on everything."

"That makes sense." I stare at the reflection of the moon for a few minutes before announcing, "I'm out," and shaking my can. "Mind if I grab another?"

"Not at all." I head back inside. I look for a garbage or recycling bin, but no such luck. I do find a roll of garbage bags, however, so I pull one off and toss my can in. And then, since I already have it open, I throw in all the other empties on the kitchen table. That's better. Already the place looks more...fresh. And less depressing, that's for sure. Slowly, I realize that I'm not entirely sober. All I had to eat were those fries after all, and that beer went straight to my head. So, the only reasonable course of action, obviously, is to collect the empty cans from the rest of the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Hopper calls just as I'm throwing the last one in the bag.

"Oh," I start guiltily. "I didn't see a recycling, so I started one," I say with a slight blush. "I didn't mean to intrude or mess up any," I glance around, "system you may have had, but I couldn't resist." He just laughs.

"You clean when you drink? Here, have another." Grinning, he tosses me a can. I can feel it in my head; I really shouldn't, but I pop the top open and take a deep drink. "For a bartender, you don't have much of a tolerance."

"You spend hours each week watching alcohol fuck people up, you tend to develop a wariness of the stuff." He's got a sort of strange expression on his face - a cross between a grin and confusion.

"You want to go back outside?" I nod, drinking as I go. It's been a long time since I've felt this relaxed around anyone. Hopper's right - it is hard to relate to people when you don't see eye to eye, but for some reason, almost as soon as we met, I felt eye to eye with him.

It's such a crisp, beautiful night. I slip my shoes and socks off and head off the porch and run my toes through the grass. For some reason, this grass feels a lot better than the stuff in my yard. I walk to the water line and dip a toe in - cold - I jerk it back out.

"Does this get warm enough to swim in?" I call back towards the porch.

"Yeah, but not until late June. But you're welcome to give it a try now if you'd like." Was that sexual? It felt sexual. But he probably didn't mean it like that.

"It's a little too cold for my tastes," I reply with a smile. I head back to the porch - and my beer.

"You down for some music?"

"Yeah, go for it." He fires up a radio sitting on the bannister underneath a roof overhang. He turns it past hard rock and static to a throw-back channel. The first song is an Elvis song that I start singing along to very off-pitch. He laughs and even joins in. I start jumping around, dancing stupidly, and grab his hands to swing his arms

around. He lets me and even smiles a little. Then the song ends, and "Fly Me to the Moon," by the crooner Frank Sinatra starts up. I freeze for a second, unsure. His hands are still in mine, and God, do I want to actually dance with him, but he might not want-

He moves one of his arms up a little and to the side, pulling my hand with him, and moves his other hand to my back, pulling me a little closer. I happily place my now free hand up at his neck and start swinging my hips to the rhythm, and he starts doing a two step. I move with him, growing in confidence as the song picks up.

In other words, hold my hand. In other words, baby kiss me. I risk a glance in those blue eyes, hoping he doesn't see the blush on my face. His eyes stare back with an intensity I can't sustain. He then spins me out, and when I come back in, I twirl all the way until my back is against him. I still move my hips to the rhythm, and I'm rewarded with what sounds like a gasp, but then I turn out to a more respectable distance.

"You're pretty good at this," I tell him.

"You think?" he asks while dipping me down, wrapping one arm around me and the other grabbing my hand. I'm on one foot when he swings me up and around. I gasp in surprise and with a hint of fear. *In other words, please be true. In other words, I love you!*

"You didn't think I'd drop you, did you?"

"Maybe just a little," I whisper. As the song crescendos to a finish, I twirl around. He smiles down at me with a very peaceful expression. The idea that I helped bring that feeling to him makes this all worthwhile. I realize our hands are still touching, and I drop mine away. The station has started a sponsor promo, thankfully breaking what mood had just formed - at least on my side. I need more booze.

"I'm going to go grab another beer. Want one?" He nods and goes back over to the banister, lighting another cigarette. Inside, I take a few deep breaths. This has taken a turn I didn't intend.

10. The Temptation

AN: Thank you all for the reviews! They mean so much, and they're the motivational fuel that helps me write! I'm sorry that this chapter took so long, but I hope what will happen in this chapter helps make up for the delay! :)

Inside and away from him, I'm able to think a little clearer. Only half an hour until midnight. The cop who drove me back to the bar that one day said things get better after May 23rd, and I've chosen to believe that as soon as the calendar day has passed, he'll just go to bed and wake up better. I don't think I'll be able to stay much longer and keep my hands to myself. And honestly that would be the worst thing to do - not only the betrayal of friendship, but if in his emotionally-vulnerable and drunken state, he consents and then regrets it, I doubt he would ever reach out to someone again.

"You start cleaning again?" I hear him call from the porch.

"No," I say with a laugh but am unable to supply a suitable excuse for my extended departure. So I just hope he won't ask and bring him a beer.

"None for you?" Damnit, I was hoping he wouldn't notice that.

"Yeah, I think I've had enough for now. I wouldn't want to get unruly and smash some stuff," I say jokingly. He takes a long draw before responding.

"I wouldn't think unruly is possible for you." Do I really come off as that serious?

"I've had my teenage moments, let's just say that." I try to be light-hearted because a sadness seems to have settled over him.

"It's almost time, isn't it?" he says abruptly.

"Time?" I stammer.

"Midnight." I nod, then realize he hasn't looked at me and is just staring at the stars.

"Yeah." He says nothing for a long time and then turns to go inside, beer and cigarette in hand. After a second of hesitation, I follow. "Are you heading to bed now?"

"No, I was going to watch TV and torture myself for a few more hours." True to his word, he flops on to the couch and turns on the television. "You should go though," he says, finally looking at me. I hesitate.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I really don't mind staying-"

"I want to be alone," he says, whip like. I feel like he socked me in the gut. Shit, I was trying to help, and I intruded. God, that's so typical of me. I'm so bad at reading people.

"Oh, I totally understand. I'm so sorry to have overstayed. I'll go." He says nothing, and I grab my coat and tug on my shoes.

"Tricia," he calls, somehow getting right behind me without me hearing. I jump slightly, turning. "You're right - I probably shouldn't be alone right now. I'm sorry that I," he trails off. "I just feel so guilty sometimes," he says suddenly, turning away slightly. He wipes a quick hand over his eyes. I take half a step closer and place my hand on his arm.

"Jim," I start, unsure how to vocalize my thoughts. "I guarantee you've done nothing to feel guilty for - you're a good man - you help the residents of this town, you clearly loved your daughter very much and did everything you could to help her-"

"If I had paid more attention, spent more time with her, maybe we would have caught it earlier, and she would have been able to fight it off," he interrupts. Oh.

"You can't know that," I interject. "And there's no benefit from torturing yourself with hypotheticals." He eyes me skeptically. Okay, I'll try a different approach. "Will you tell me why you feel guilty?" He sighs and wanders over to the couch. I sit next to him, about a foot away.

"It's another year where I'm alive. And she's not. She should be here.

She has so much more right to be alive than I do, and yet she's...gone, and I'm here." My heart aches for him.

"Oh, Jim. No one deserves to feel guilty for existing." No wonder he drinks so much and is always carrying around a pill bottle. "Sarah - I think - would want you to take care of yourself, not hurt yourself. I bet she loved you very much." He doesn't say anything, so I go back to talking about how I dealt with my grief since that seemed to help him before. "After my grandma passed away, I didn't enjoy anything - food, friends, TV, nothing - everything felt gray. And I felt guilty for what felt like squandering life that I know she would have fought tooth and nail to have, and so I just felt worse about myself, which made me hate everything more. But then I realized that as much as she loved me, and *because* she loved me, she would be gentle with me. She wouldn't have scolded me or been angry with me for not enjoying life - she would have been sad that I was hurting, but she would have been compassionate with me."

"But I don't feel guilty for squandering life, I feel like I'm not squandering it enough."

"You don't need to torture yourself out of guilt," I finally say plainly. "Sarah loved you - she wouldn't want you to hurt yourself on her account; she wouldn't want you to hurt." His dark blue eyes meet mine, and to my surprise, his hands find their way across my legs and to the back of my neck.

"Jim," I gasp out of surprise and from the electricity in his touch that sends sparks across my skin. "What are you doing?"

"Sometimes I indulge in physical comforts. When the pain gets to be too much, and I crave...warmth." God, do I want to be his indulgence. "And you said I shouldn't torture myself. So..."

"I'm touched you shared that with me." I'm stalling for time, my brain is short circuiting. I can't look into his eyes, afraid of what I might see there (hurt, lust, dead-eyed pain?), and I don't know what to do. My body is screaming for me to throw myself at him, but my brain and heart are begging me to play it safe. If I slept with him tonight and never heard from him again (as appears to be his pattern), I don't think my heart would ever recover. He moves his head a fraction of

an inch closer, and I throw my hands up so they softly brush against his chest - he stops.

"I think you should get some sleep." I risk a glance into his eyes. Whatever there may have been before, right now it's just hurt. I start rambling. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that would help you right now. It might help get you through the night, but I think it will make tomorrow harder. I'm sorry," I add again.

"I'm a grown man, I can make my own decisions," his deep voice rumbles. I feel the thumb that's on my thigh rub a circle on me. "And it's not like you don't want me." My breath catches, and I blush furiously. I was still holding out hope that he didn't know that. "I don't see what the problem is."

"The problem is that I think if we sleep together, you won't talk to me anymore." He's still drunk enough that I'm assuming he won't remember tonight, and that's makes me bolder than I otherwise would be. "And I think right now you need a friend more than you need another pussy." His eyebrows shoot up.

"I didn't know you talked like that." There seems to be even more of a hunger in his voice than there was before.

"I'm not as innocent as I come off," I whisper. I check his expression again - goodbye hurt, hello lust. I start talking before I can think my words through. "Look, if tomorrow you feel the same way, I'll be here in a heartbeat, but right now I don't think you have a clear enough head to make a decision you won't regret." Slowly, he starts nodding and takes his hands away. I can think a little clearer as he moves away.

"Alright. I would still like you to stay though, if you would. As a friend," he adds.

"Absolutely," I say with a smile. At least, no matter what else happens, we're friends. I have no idea if his attraction to me is genuine or a byproduct of alcohol and emotional vulnerability. But I guess I'll find out tomorrow if he calls me...but that assumes he remembers my offer. He stands.

"I'll get ready for bed so you can finally leave. But...would you mind...laying next to me? Just as a friend?" he adds.

"I wouldn't mind at all." While he brushes his teeth, I take it upon myself to straighten up in the living room as well, adding the empty cans to the collection and throwing out take-out containers. The place looks better already.

A few minutes later, when he appears in a ragged t-shirt and sweats, my heart starts pounding. The intimacy - although not really sexual - of what is happening is making me sweat. Wordlessly, I follow him as he heads to his bedroom.

"I prefer the left side, if that's alright," he says while climbing in. I swallow hard and nod. This is probably the only chance I'll get to hold him, and I'm going to savor it. And do my absolute best not to blow it.

I climb in next to him, but I stay above the covers. I don't want to fall asleep here and inadvertently kill my mother. Still, I slowly move closer to him, waiting for him to change his mind and order me to leave, but he doesn't, and I gradually relax. I lay on my side, tucked against him while he lays on his back. I lay one arm on his chest while the other I tuck underneath my head. *I'm in bed with Hopper*, repeats through my head with disbelief. But other than that one hand on him, I keep to myself. I will not try to grab his dick, I remind myself. Or lean over and kiss him. He asked me to stay as a friend, and I will respect that. But god, I get hit with these horrible urges that make my core ache with the need to feel him inside me. And he did say he wanted...no, that's a bad idea. *Breathe*, I remind myself.

After almost fifteen minutes of silence, I hear Hopper whisper a, "thank you," into the dark. I move the hand that's on him in a gentle, small circle.

"Thank you," I reply even more softly. Fifteen minutes after that, his breathing is steady enough that he must be asleep. As quietly as I am able, I slip out of bed. I swallow hard. No matter what may happen, at least I was able to help him through today. And I think he appreciated that. He's not hung up about me like I am about him, but at least I was able to spend time with him. *And I made it into his bed*, I

think with a smile. As I leave, I know a large part of my heart stays behind.

11. The Aftermath

A/N: I hope you all like the latest chapter! Things are crazy in my life right now, but I'm going to do my best to update more regularly again. Hopefully over the summer I'll get a bit more on track. Lots more slow-burn to come, but things will begin heating up pretty soon...

The Aftermath

The first time I see my mom is the next morning as I'm getting ready for work.

"You got home late," she comments icily over a cup of coffee.

"I didn't realize you were still up," I say with feigned casualness. We were never good at making up after a fight.

"Did you really think I'd be able to sleep while you were out with that degenerate?" The bowl I'm holding slams on the counter. How dare she talk about him like that!

"What's your problem - you don't even know him."

"Why don't you have him over for dinner sometime then," she says snidely.

"I'm going to work. Goodbye," I choke out between clenched teeth. I'll eat something there rather than spend another minute with her.

I wake up to a pounding headache and a too-bright sun streaming through the windows. I sit up with a groan, pulling the blinds closed before stumbling to the bathroom for some aspirin. Splashing water on my face, I try and orient myself. Let's see...Thursday afternoon I made it to work and helped on the case on the Johnson's farm, Friday...I try to think through the fog, and I have a few blurry memories of watching tv and going to the grocery store...and then nothing. Fuck, what day is it? God, please don't let it be Saturday...but if it's not Saturday, how many days did I lose this

year?

I go to the kitchen and turn on the radio and wait for the weather or traffic announcement to play while I throw together a turkey sandwich.

"Good afternoon, Hawkins. Hope you're enjoying the beautiful weather this Sunday-" I switch off the radio - damn thing makes my head hurt more. Sunday. The 24th. I breathe a sigh. There is the question, however, of how I spent my Saturday. I flop into a chair at the table, and it takes me a few minutes between the headache and the grogginess to realize the table is practically clear of garbage. What the... I highly doubt *I* did that. So then who...

My brother has a key to the place, but we haven't talked for a few months. If Diane had come by, I would have let her in, but she wouldn't have come by. I refuse to acknowledge the most obvious answer, because if *she* was here, figuring out just what I did and said yesterday becomes a lot more important.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and head back to my bedroom. Well, only one set of pillows looks slept on, but that doesn't necessarily eliminate us sleeping together. I lay back down and notice a hint of perfume from her hair on the sheets. God, I promised myself I wouldn't do this to her; she deserves much better than to be mixed up with me. She's been so generous with her time and energy, and then I have to go and be an asshole and seduce her to my bed and not even remember it. Because based on my history, that's exactly what I did. I've done that to plenty of women, but at least *they* didn't actually care about me. And I didn't care about them.

I should have hidden my car keys before I started drinking Friday. I told myself I could keep myself from demanding more of her time, but clearly that was not the case. She's so beautiful, and knowing that she wants me was clearly too much of a temptation to keep me away from her. And now...fuck, what do I do now?

If it was anyone else, I'd pretend it didn't happen and move on with my life. But she deserves better than that, considering what a good person she is. And as much as I shouldn't be attached to her, I don't want to burn what at this point amounts to a friendship with her. But

I don't think any friendship can bounce back from: "I don't remember sleeping with you, and we probably shouldn't do it again for your own good, thanks though." I rub my hand over my face with a groan.

A few hours later, I wake to the phone ringing. At the edge of my consciousness, I can hear a whisper of a promise...*I'll be there in a heartbeat*...that disappears with another ring of the phone. I'm tempted to disconnect the damn thing and go back to bed, but I figure I should see who that is. For some reason, the thought that it might be Tricia trying to check on me is the only thing that gets me to the phone.

"Hello?" I grumble.

"Hey, Hopper, welcome back to the land of the living," Benny's voice comes through the telephone far too loud.

"Hey, Benny. What's up?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were doing okay. Though, I must say, this is the least I've worried about you in a long time?"

"Why do you say?" I ask before I can think better of it.

"Well, with that mighty fine gal you were with, it'd be hard to be too down in the dumps," he says with a laugh. My stomach falls - great, I went out in public with her. Now the rumors will really fly... Gossip is one of the most harmless reasons she'd be better off if I just left her alone.

"I'm sure I managed," I reply tersely.

"Oh, hey, I didn't mean," he stammers.

"No, no, I know you didn't. I'm nursing a massive hangover is all, I didn't mean to snap at you."

"I understand. You need a cup of coffee or just a friend?" I inhale to reject his offer, but he continues. "How about a ride? Last I heard, you were double parked outside The Big Wig." I stifle a groan and roll my eyes at myself - that's the bar Tricia works at. Great. Well, I need to get my truck sometime.

"A ride would be great," I reply after some hesitation.

"Lucy, I'm going to take my fifteen," I call. I didn't have much of an appetite when I arrived, so I just started working. If I'm going to be at work, I might as well get paid. Just as I'm exiting from behind the bar, two more customers enter. I give her a small smile as I duck out on the rush - today's been pretty slow so far.

"Tricia, could you hold on a second," she calls after me. I'm a little annoyed - I did just ask for my break, but when I turn around, I see why she called me back; Hopper just walked in. He either hasn't seen me yet, or he's pretending he hasn't. "How can we help you gentlemen?" Lucy asks, completely composed, as if this situation wasn't rife with uncertainty: Does he remember what he said? Does he resent me for not sleeping with him? Is he embarrassed he offered? Does he regret hitting on me...does he not feel the same now that he's sober?

"We've come for the keys to that truck outside, if you don't mind," his friend, Benny, answers.

"Let's see, where might those be? Tricia, do you know?" At the sound of my name, Hopper gives a quick glance in my direction - far too quick for me to get even a hint about his thoughts, let alone his feelings.

"They might be behind the bar," I walk back over, telling myself it's only paranoia making me feel like Hopper's gaze is boring into me. I search behind the counter for the recessed panel that denotes the hidden cubby where the managers hide confiscated contraband. I dig around. "Are these them?" I hold up a key ring.

"Yeah," Hopper grunts. I hand them over, taking care not to accidentally brush his skin. I can feel Lucy peering at me. "Thanks." He heads for the door, but Benny catches his shoulder.

"You don't want to stay for a beer?" Benny offers, a hint of confusion in his voice.

"Naw, I should get home. Thanks, man." And, just like that, he's gone.

I turn to Lucy and give her an exasperated expression.

"You've worked here longer than me - did you really need my help finding the keys?" I keep my voice low in hopes the other customers won't hear.

"Well, excuse me for being a little curious about exactly what happened after you left yesterday with a thoroughly intoxicated Hopper."

"How do you know that? You don't even work Saturdays," I exclaim.

"No, but Marty does, and Marty came in this morning to open up." I roll my eyes at the mole-hills people will blow into mountains for some amusement. "Also, Alex called me on Saturday to tell me the news," she says with a slight squeal, but her excitement quickly dies. "But what the hell was that?" she asks, on the edge of anger for Jim's not conforming to what she clearly hoped would be the proper romantic-clichéd script.

"*That* was Jim Hopper - what else did you expect?" I admit, part of me is right there with Lucy, enraged at the cold shoulder, but most of me is nonplussed - this is, after all, exactly why I didn't sleep with Hopper last night.

"Hopps, what the hell was that?" Benny asks beside me. I squint at him.

"What the hell was what?"

"That, in there. You acted like you barely knew that pretty bartender, and after you sat for hours in my place yesterday - and did God knows what else after you left." I stop in my tracks.

"We what?"

"Hey, that's between you and her, no judgement there," he says with a belly laugh.

"Benny, slow down. I'm a tad too close to the height of this hangover to be doing much in terms of deductive reasoning, and I have no

memory of Saturday. What the hell happened?" That sobers him some.

"Oh, well, you two came into my place at about two, spent hours talking in a booth - I think about Sara mostly," he whispers that last part, but it still hits me in the gut. Maybe I do need that beer after all...

"What makes you think things got raunchy after we left?" He shrugs.

"Because of the way she was looking at you...and because I know you," he says with a laugh, "I figured you wouldn't pass up *that* opportunity." With half a backward glance, I think about how Tricia reacted when she saw me. Either she's a lot more experienced and callous than she let on, which I think unlikely, or we didn't sleep together. No deep blush, no body language indicating shame or embarrassment, no preening...not the typical reaction a woman has when she encounters last night's lover.

"I don't think we slept together," I announce. He does a double take.

"Is...is that why you were so cold? She wouldn't put out?" I shove him.

"No, Jesus. This isn't high school, Benny. I-just, why would I act any differently?" He doesn't answer that. Friendly isn't really my usual demeanor. I go to my truck.

"Well....do you think you're going to sleep with her?"

"No," I exclaim, unintentionally scolding. "She's way too young for me," I offer as explanation. He does a double take.

"Hold on, let me get this straight...you're going to not sleep with a beautiful woman...because she's too *young*? That's a selling point, not a negative," he exclaims as I hop into my truck.

"Don't be a pervert," I say around a half lit cigarette.

"Oh, arrest me, officer," he jokes. That manages to get half a grin out of me.

"Thanks for the ride." He mock salutes as I drive off. The one plus side of seeing Tricia is at least I have a better idea where we stand. I heave a sigh of relief that nothing sexual happened, but that still leaves a mystery of what she was doing in my house...and my bed.

AN: Thanks to user DestiiinyRae for the encouragement to write a chapter from Hopper's perspective! It was an idea I had been toying with, but wasn't sure if I would do it justice, but I figured we needed to check in with Hopper after all that :).

12. Three Weeks Later

Three Weeks Later

I scrub at a stubborn spot on the bartop. The doorbell chimes, and my heart falls as, as usual, the customer isn't Hopper. He's gone from one of our best customers to about a once-a-weeker. Whether that's just because he's trying to cut down on his drinking or he's going someplace else is unclear. Last time he was in, I tried to get a better idea, greeting him with a friendly, "Hey, stranger, how have you been?" I got a grumble and a gesture for a whiskey glass. So much for that. I just want to make sure he's not mad at me.

I've toyed with the idea of confronting him at the station, since I know he'll be there, but my hands start shaking as soon as I pick up my car keys to make the drive. So, I've resigned myself that the glimpse I got into his soul was the only one I'll get. He clearly only wants to talk to me when he's stone-cold drunk. Which is also the only time he *wants* me. I wince every time I remember what I said to him, "*I'll be here in a heartbeat...*" What was I thinking?

At least things with my mom have finally been papered over - I think largely helped by my excursion away from what she considers the straight and narrow being a one time thing. So at least that's one positive thing that has come from Hopper having zero interest in me again. Which is totally FINE, I tell myself, ignoring the weight in my heart.

Finally having the place cleaned, I retire to a stool of my own behind the bar and keep on with my doodling. More and more, I've found myself doing hazy city-scapes, half-burnt cigarettes with trails of smoke, and a cabin by a beautiful pond. I set my pen down from the latest lighting variation on the bar top as the the door rings again, and I get ready to serve. I do a double take. Hello, handsome. A young man I haven't seen before walks in and scans the place before approaching the bar.

"Are you Tricia?" he asks, brown eyes sharp with intelligence.

"I am. Do I know you?" He blushes a little.

"This is a little odd - my dad is a regular, and he apparently thinks we should get to know each other better."

"Oh, I remember him, yes." I laugh a little - the situation is a little awkward. "Nice to meet you,...?"

"John," he answers. "It's a pleasure." He extends his hand and we shake hands. "Mind if I have a seat?"

"Not at all," I say with a genuine smile. It will be good for me to talk to someone closer to my age. The regulars are all so much older than me.

"So, you're definitely new in town or we would have met before now - where are you from?"

"That's what everyone I meet says," I say with a laugh. He shrugs.

"It's true! Hawkins is a small place." I nod.

"It certainly is. I'm from the city - I moved here about a year ago now."

"That must be quite a big change! And what do you think of Hawkins?" We make small talk - about Hawkins, his college, Indianapolis, the latest TV shows - for close to an hour before the business picks up, and he excuses himself.

"I'll stop taking up your time. It was lovely to meet you, Tricia. If you'd like to continue our conversation, give me a call." He jots down his number on a napkin and passes it to me.

"Thanks, I'd like that." I try and sound as peppy as possible, but the whole time we were talking, I was so aware of how *young* he was. I hope that's not how Hopper feels about *me*. But I should give him more of a chance, he's cute and seems nice enough. There's certainly no reason *not* to go to a movie or grab a bite to eat, I tell the hesitation in my core.

Lucy joins me for the Friday rush just as Hopper walks in with two friends. My heart stutters at the sight of him, but he looks right through me. I try and shake off the dark shroud his (lack of) greeting

inspires, but I'm not successful. And I know Lucy notices the interaction. She rolls her eyes and sighs.

"God, what is his problem," she mutters. I shrug.

"It doesn't matter," I say through a pained smile. She gives me an unconvinced look, but things are too busy to dwell on the matter. She gracefully takes care of their orders, however, while I busy myself tending to the other customers.

The night is busy, but at least the customers aren't too rowdy. The two fights that do break out are quickly settled without any bloodshed or excessive violence. Things are so busy, I'm able to avoid Hopper and company's area of the bar for much of the night. When Lucy is on break, I look over to make sure everyone is taken care of, and I feel like I've been punched in the gut. Hopper's got his hands all over a bleached-blond, tall, thin, super-model like woman, showing her how to shoot a pool cue. As if she doesn't already know, I think with disgust.

Aware I am staring and stopped in my tracks, I quickly look away, scanning for anything to divert my attention.

"More margaritas, ladies?" I ask a crowd of married women clearly out for a night of freedom. Thankfully, I get a chorus of yes's, so I am able to distract myself by preparing the drinks. I think I make them a bit stronger than I meant to since my hand is shaking while I pour the tequila.

"Everyone's topped up, I'm taking my 15," I tell Lucy the second she's back.

"Even Hopper's group?" she asks darkly. I have to bite my lip to keep my eyes from watering.

"No, I guess I didn't do them."

"Oh, Tricia," she says, voice full of sympathy.

"See you in 15," I call with a failed attempt at cheerfulness. I spend my break in the alley, taking shakey, deep breaths, desperately trying not to cry, and berating myself for being so hung up on someone

who's practically a stranger.

When I come back to the bar, I immediately see the graceful blonde still on Hopper's arm, but his two friends are at the bar, having what looks like an angry discussion with Lucy.

"What's going on?" I interject, trying to break the visible tension.

"Your coworker has cut us off," one of his friends answers. I look a question at Lucy, who is standing defiantly, uncowed by these two burly men. Go Lucy, I make a mental note.

"Well, I'm sure she has a reason in doing so. And considering how hostile you two are being, I agree with her decision."

"We're hostile because she cut us off," one yells. The other calms him down with a arm on his shoulder.

"We're just going to take our business elsewhere, you know."

"Good, take your friend with you." Her tone leaves no room for argument, and she turns away to help other customers. I bite back a smile and give them a shrug before doing the same.

Ten minutes later, Hopper appears in front of me while I'm making a martini.

"Why'd you cut us off?" he slurs.

"It was Lucy's decision, not mine. I'd ask her. But I imagine she'd say because you all were getting unruly."

"We're not unruly!"

"Maybe not, but that's our decision to make," Lucy chimes in from behind me.

"I don't understand," he says, turning on the charm - leaning in with an innocent expression. I can feel the ice around my heart melting instantly.

"Then leave," she declares. "You're free to do so if you don't like our

policies." He shakes his head.

"Are you...trying to get us to leave?" he asks, glancing between the two of us. I look away.

"You're supposedly a smart man, Hopper. Figure it out," she snaps before leaving the conversation again. He looks back at me, unreadable. I hold his gaze for a few seconds before shift my eyes away - the less he knows about how I feel, the better.

"I," he hesitates, and then turns away. Ten minutes later, they're gone. To my dismay, the blonde went with them. Lucy gives me a sympathetic look. But at least I don't have to fucking see him pursuing other women. When we finally close for the night, I cry the whole way home.

13. Out on the Town

A/N: Thank you all for the kind reviews! As always, they mean so much to me! To answer guest reviewer Elle, I do plan to develop Lucy and Trisha's friendship, and to guest reviewer Amie, thank you for your kind compliments! I do have a few original stories I am also working on (one of the reasons these chapters can get delayed), and it is a bear to finish a story, but I really really want to finish this one. Fingers crossed I will - I have a rough plot sketched out until the end of the first season (and I'm eagerly awaiting season two to see if Tricia can continue to fit in Hopper's story). Anyways, I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

Out on the Town

"You need to let me take you out," Lucy offers the next time we work together.

"Huh?" I'm dumbfounded.

"We should go out to a bar together!"

"But we work at a bar together." I'm still a little confused.

"No, silly, like in our freetime? Enjoy life?" Apparently my social skills are even rustier than I thought. "Maybe flirt with some handsome men?"

"That does sound appealing...Okay!" Anything to take my mind off Hopper at this point, and that should be fun. Lucy has been a rather good friend lately.

A week and a day later, we've worked out our schedules so we both have the night off, and I'm in my bathroom, teasing and curling my hair.

"Who is the girl you're going out with again?" my mom asks, stopping by.

"Lucy, we work together." She nods a few times.

"Good, good. I'm glad, sweetie. Have fun. Do you know when you'll be home?"

"Probably late. I wouldn't stay up."

"Alright. Be safe," she adds. I roll my eyes; she's always such a mom.

An hour later, I'm meeting up with Lucy in a noisy pub. I think this is my first time on this side of the bar in Hawkins.

"Let me buy you a drink, and then let's dance!" Judging by the flush on her cheeks, she's already had a few, so I need to catch up. I eagerly agree, and I drink half the cosmo before bringing it with me on the dance floor.

This is the most fun I've had for a long time. Most of the other dancers are considerably older, but some of the men aren't too homely, and I accept a few offers to dance. As the night goes on, I collect more than a few phone numbers and rack up some drunken kisses.

Taking a dance break at the bar, I get another free drink, which I happily accept. At this point, I'm drunk enough that I'm not quite sure what my suitor looks like, but hey, a free drink is a free drink. Lucy has slowed down her drinking, so I'm trusting her to keep a handle on me. So far, she's doing a good job, warning me away from men who are too old or unattractive, and she's watching our drinks for both of us while I go on another dancing excursion.

All of this attention is flattering, but I do feel a bit like a hunk of meat, the way some of the men are looking at me. It's nice to know I'm at least somewhat desirable.

"You want to try out another bar?" she shouts over the music.

"Sure," I shout back. Might as well see what Hawkins has to offer!

A loud commotion in the station interrupts my concentration on the paperwork I have stayed late to finish. Paperwork is also a good excuse to moderate my habit - try as I might to get over it, I'm still hung up about my lost memories the Saturday I spent with Trisha. I

could have said anything... As I have many times before, I have determined that I should really cut back on drinking. I shake my head to clear it and refocus on the task at hand.

God, I'm so obsessed I'm now hearing her voice...no, wait, that is her voice, coming from the officer pen. What the hell is she doing here?

I arrive to the main area to find an officer on each of her arms, dragging her to the holding cell while she hollers.

"Let me go! I'm fine - you have no right to lock me up. I'm being perfectly polite," she insists while dragging her feet and trying to worm out of their grip and grab on to any solid object to hold up their progress.

"What the hell is going on here?" I ask Powell - one of the officers involved.

"Public intoxication, chief. We're going to put her in the holding cell until she sobers up." That starts a new reign of yelling and protests on Tricia's part that we now have to shout over.

"Is that necessary? Can't you just take her home? She doesn't seem dangerous."

"We gave her the option, chief. She said she'd rather come to the station," the other officer says.

"Did she know that if you put her in the holding cell it counts as an arrest on her permanent record? And she'll have to be bailed out?" They both look at each other and shrug.

"I mean, she's pretty drunk. What she is and isn't understanding is up for debate." I sigh. I really hate the idea of her spending the night in a cell, and she's done so much for me, it's only fair I return the favor...and that's all I'm thinking about as I gesture for the officers to let her go. I'm definitely not making an excuse to spend more time with her or favoring her due to my ridiculous crush.

They both back away from her, and she immediately starts wandering around the station, going desk to desk and bumping into things.

"What made you pick her up anyways?" I ask them.

"We got a call about a young woman staggering about downtown and trying to get into closed stores." I raise my eyebrows. This doesn't seem like the Tricia I know. Granted, I don't know her very well, but from what I've seen, she doesn't strike me as the type to lose control of her faculties like this. My train of thought is interrupted by a crash. Tricia is standing by the employee awards wall - two of the placards have been knocked to the floor.

"Whoops," she says cheerily and leans against the display, knocking more off in the process. She looks down at them, seemingly confused as how they fell. I shake my head at her antics. If it wasn't stuff I was responsible for that she was wrecking, this would almost be endearing.

"Chief?" Powell asks. I sigh. This is obviously not a sustainable situation.

"I'll bring her back to my office. She can't do too much damage there. Tricia, come with me," I say, offering a hand.

"Hopper," she exclaims with a brilliant smile, taking my hand and following my lead. "I didn't realize you were here." I raise my eyebrows - I've been in the room for a solid five minutes. "How are you? I've missed you. Wait, no, pretend I didn't say that. I'm mad at you. I don't care," she states defiantly. Well, that straightforwardness is a change. Once we're in my office, I direct her to sit in one of the arm chairs off to the side. I sit in the other once across from her.

"Why are you mad at me?" I ask. She hesitates as her eyes dart around my face and then the office. It seems she's not quite drunk enough to have lost all her inhibitions.

"I...you...I don't really have a good reason to be," she finally says, looking at her hands. And then her reserved nature disappears as she jumps to her feet and wanders to the file cabinet. I have to grab her and pull her back to the chair.

"You need to stay seated so you don't cause any more trouble," I say simply.

"Am I in trouble?"

"Not really - we just need to keep you here until you sober up."

"That might be a while," she says with a depreciating grin. I shrug. We sit in silence while she continues glancing around the office. It's possible this might be my only chance to be sure I am getting an honest answer about what happened the Saturday I can't remember.

"Tricia, I need to ask you something." The seriousness in my tone focuses her attention.

"Yes?" she asks, head cocked to a ridiculously sideways angle.

"We...I went to the bar to find you on the 23rd, right?" She nods. "And then we went to Benny's and talked for a few hours?" She nods again, smiling this time.

"Yeah, it was nice. You actually talked to me." I'll file that away for future analysis.

"And then we...went back to my place?"

"Yeah," she says with an easy laugh, "but it wasn't like that. I mean, at one point you wanted it to be, but it wasn't."

"Come again?"

"I mean, we 'went back to your place,' but we didn't *go back to your place*. If you know what I mean." I say nothing, and a few rapid blinks later, she sighs and says, "Like I was at your house with you, and we talked some more, you heard me fight with my mom over the phone, we danced, had few beers, and I laid next to you until you fell asleep. And you hit on me at one point, but I turned you down because you were too drunk to actually consent. So nothing sexual happened."

"I see." My heart is pounding - shit, so I did hit on her. How much did I reveal? At least she had the good sense to turn me down.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks me, face free of any malice or suspicion. I should lie, but I can't bring myself to do so to her big, innocent eyes. She won't remember this anyways.

"I was just thinking about how good it was that you turned me down." Her whole demeanor changes - she leans back in her chair and her face turns to slate. "Not, not because I don't want, that I wouldn't want...but because that would have been really unfair to you," I stammer.

"I see." Her tone is clipped. I shake my head.

"I don't think you do. Tricia, I'm no good. It would have been a horrible for us to sleep together. I don't really do relationships, and-"

"Why do you assume I would want a relationship with you if we slept together?" That takes me back.

"I mean, you don't strike me as the one-night stand type." She shrugs.

"You're right, I'm not. And that's why I turned you down at the time since that was clear that's what would have happened. But I don't see why we can't occasionally sleep together." I blink a few times. This conversation has really gotten away from me. "I...I don't know why I'm harping on this. It takes two, and it's not like you want to," she says with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"What makes you think I don't want to?" I blurt out. I thought my desires had been painfully obvious. She stares at me and then narrows her eyes. When she speaks, she speaks with anger.

"What? What the hell are you trying to pull, Hopper. You barely have talked to me since that night, one of the few times I saw you, you spent the night taking another woman home," my stomach sinks at that - I knew that was a bad idea. "When I told you that if you still wanted me when you were sober that I-, I - it doesn't matter. You have made it clear that you don't want me. Which is fine. I mean, it's whatever. You're allowed to not want me, obviously, but, like, please don't fucking pretend that-" I hold up a hand to stop her.

"Then let me clarify. Tricia, I do want you. Physically, I," I pause. This is uncomfortable, but she deserves the truth, "I do want you. How could anyone not?"

"Oh," she says quietly, her affect brightening. I intended to continue

telling her about how she deserves someone better than myself, but before I get the chance, she's out of her chair and sauntering over, leaning over me. Her hands tug on my collar and run through my hair; her weight settles on my lap as she climbs into my chair, effectively straddling me. "You should kiss me now." She looks at me with those big eyes. I can't breathe, and I can't but glance down at her plump lips and a little lower at the cleavage her plunging tank top shows off. *Fuck.*

14. Will They? Won't They?

Will They? Won't They?

"Oh, you really do want me. Even though you're sober. I thought..." She trails off, staring into my eyes. She closes her eyes and leans in, and I'm jolted to action - I grab her waist and easily lift her off me, depositing her back in her chair. She makes a squeak of surprise, and her eyes flash with anger. "What the hell, Hopper?"

"You didn't let me finish. I do want you," she makes to get up again, but I lay a heavy hand on her shoulder, keeping her put, "but you're very young. And you deserve someone who can treat you better than I can. Someone who isn't a drunk with years of baggage. Who knows better than to...flirt with other women in front of you. Who won't go on bingers and forget what happened. Or rely on the kindness of, effectively, strangers to make it home safely. Someone not me." I manage a sad smile. She's quiet for a few minutes, looking deep in thought.

"Doesn't that seem like a decision I should make? Instead of you making for me?" That takes me off guard. I open my mouth, expecting an answer to come, but nothing does. "And like I said, I don't need to be in a relationship...I just want to kiss you," she says sadly, her gaze flickering to mine and away. "Please?" She reaches her hands out to me again, grabbing on my shirt. I want her so badly, but it's not fair to her. And it's in no way fair to kiss her when she probably wouldn't even remember it. Of course, it's only the alcohol making her this bold. In the morning, she won't ask such a thing, so I won't be tempted to ignore my better judgement. Meaning this might be my only chance to kiss her.

"I- I think you should get some rest," I say, moving her hands off me and putting them in her lap. She purses her lips in silent anger and turns her head away. "There's more than a few women in town who can attest they would have preferred to have never met me. I don't want you added to that list," I offer as explanation with a sad smile. "The last time I tried to date someone, which was a couple years ago now, things ended...badly. I was a bum who couldn't be there for her, I was constantly forgetting dates, missing her calls because I was

passed out drunk. It wasn't good. I'm not...I'm not stable enough to be in even a semblance of a relationship." She doesn't respond. "Can I drive you home?" She frantically shakes her head. She rubs her eyes before looking back at me, and guilt washes over me.

"No way - my mom would freak if she knew I was this drunk."

"Alright. You're welcome to spend the night here if you like. That chair isn't too uncomfortable." She nods.

"You'll stay too? This place would be super creepy alone." I nod.

"I'll stay. I think I owe you that much," I say with a small smile. "There's a bathroom down the hall, and a locker room if you'd like to shower."

"I'm fine for now. Thank you for letting me stay." I just nod and return to the file I was working on before this all happened. She's quiet for a long time, but the occasional glance tells me she's not sleeping yet - she stares unseeing at the wall in front of her. Judging by the lines in her face, she is not thinking happy thoughts. A better man would ask her what was wrong, attempt to comfort her. But I'm not that man. So instead I just give her space. Eventually, she's asleep.

I wake up stiff. With a groan, I stretch out my muscles and yawn. A large coat I must have been using as a blanket falls off me - where did I get that? Where the hell am I? I rub my neck, looking around. I'm in an office...Hopper's office? Definitely Hopper's office - he's dozing in his desk chair. But why the *hell* am I here? Last I remember, I was with Lucy at one of the bars downtown... I get up to find the bathroom, inadvertently waking Hopper.

"Oh, good, you're up. How are you feeling?" he asks as if this is perfectly normal situation, and I'm not frantically trying to figure out how I ended up here...and what I may have said or attempted to do over the course of the night.

"Fine, for now. Bathroom though?"

"Down the hall, to the right." I take my time in the bathroom, trying to freshen up as much as possible. My hair is a tangled mess and my makeup is smudged all over. Not to mention I'm sure I smell like a spring meadow after all that bar hopping and dancing. I'm also begging my brain to supply the missing memories, but I've got nothing but the rough outline of my hands in his hair. I hide my face in my hands. *What did I do?*

When I return, Hopper has two mugs of coffee at the small table near the chair where I slept. He's sitting in the other chair, calmly smoking a cigarette.

"So," I say.

"So," he repeats. "I assume you don't remember what happened last night." I nod, feeling myself blush. If he didn't think I was too immature before, he definitely does now. "So, I can't speak to what you did before 2 AM, but Powell brought you in for public intoxication. Apparently someone called to complain about you being visibly drunk and trying to break into closed shops downtown."

"Great," I say with a slight grimace. How did Lucy and I get separated? Is she okay? Does my mom know I got brought to the station?

"Protocol says that in situations like that, we either take the person home or keep them in the holding cell to sober up. But you insisted you didn't want to go home, and if we had put you in the cell you would have needed to call your mom anyways, so instead I just kept you here to make sure you wouldn't be in danger. Or in the way in the station," he says with a smile at something I don't understand. "You were causing a bit of havoc," he explains.

"Oh, so is that all?" I say, feeling my heart slow down. Certainly not my finest moments, but nothing I can't live with.

"Well," he hesitates, and I tense again. "We also had a talk. I figure we should probably recap that discussion so that we're both on the same page." I swallow hard. Suddenly I'm not feeling so well after all.

"Alright. Hit me - what stupid things did I say?" I say with a small

smile as I take a sip of the coffee. He hesitates, and my pulse races.

"We...both said some stupid things, I think. Um, I'll just recap. So, you said you were mad at me but wouldn't say why, then we discussed why we should not be in any sort of sexual relationship," I can't help but grimace at that, "and we determined that you were operating under the misunderstanding that I don't...that I'm not physically attracted to you." I bury my head in my hands. Way to go, Tricia. Now you get to have this horribly uncomfortable conversation *twice*. Wait - did he just say *misunderstanding*?

"What did you just say?" I snap.

"Which part?" he asks, looking impressively nonplussed.

"That you don't - I *misunderstood* that you're unattracted to me?"

"I - yes." I examine him, trying to get a read on him.

"So...you...*are* attracted to me?"

"...yes," he says after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh." Suddenly the tension in the room doesn't seem so one-sided. It's too early for these sorts of revelations - my head is swimming. "I...I'm confused. If you're attracted to me, and you definitely know that I'm attracted to you, why haven't you..." I trail off, hoping he'll let me not make me finish my question, but he's silent. "Why haven't you made a move," I finish. His sharp blue eyes meet mine, more guarded than I've seen them in a long time.

"Because I shouldn't. You shouldn't be with me. Frankly, you deserve better than a drunk with minimal social skills who can barely function as an adult." I ponder this turn of events - he does want me? But it's concerns about not being good enough that have stopped him from pursuing me while sober? That's a compliment...or is it just a well-thought out excuse? I bring my gaze to his - his eyes are pained. If I asked, I wonder if I could convince him to give me a chance...but I'm sure I hit on him enough last night for a lifetime worth of rejection. I sigh. I already have the answer.

"Would you be able to drive me home now?" He nods, all pain gone

from his expression.

"Sure thing." It's a foggy morning as we drive across town to my house. I shouldn't be surprised that he has memorized the way there. Sometimes I forget how smart he is.

"What are you going to tell your mom?"

"The truth, probably," I say with a sigh. "Or maybe she'll have the good sense not to ask." As we pull up to my street, I start talking before I can talk myself out of it. "I'm sure I propositioned you a thousand times last night, and obviously the answer was no, so I won't ask you again today to spare us both the embarrassment. But on the off-chance that the whole 'not good enough' thing is how you genuinely feel and not a clever excuse, I would like to say that if you ever want to let me decide for myself if a man meets my criteria, I'd very much...I'd like to see you. In less formal circumstances," I finish. I'm already wishing I had kept my mouth shut. He's silent for a long time.

"Understood," he finally says as he pulls into my driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," I wave as I head out. Once inside, I lock the door and lean against it with a sigh. I don't even know how to feel. On one hand, Hopper may actually care about me in some way. On the other, those feelings are preventing him from wanting anything more with me. Him wanting me and refusing to act on it is almost worse than him not wanting me at all! Head swimming, I make my way to bed and settle back to sleep for a few more hours before I have to go to work.

15. A First Date

A First Date

I arrive at work, and Lucy squeals and wraps me in a tight hug.

"Tricia, how are you feeling? What the hell happened last night? I was so worried. I was dancing with some guy, and I thought you were next to me, and then you had just disappeared!" It's still relatively quiet, so we have some time to talk.

"Well, it seems I left the bar and went exploring...someone called the cops to complain I was publically intoxicated." She gasps.

"Oh, no. You didn't-" *see Hopper*, I expect she wants to ask but stops herself. A few customers have an ear to our conversation.

"I'm okay, they just took me back to the station to sober up." *And I saw Hopper and apparently we talked about our feelings and holy hell he claimed he actually does want me*, I want to say, but I hold my tongue for now. "One of them drove me home early this morning."

"I'm so relieved you were okay. Let's talk more later." She seems to sense there's something I'm leaving out. "Your mom survived your disappearance?"

"Yeah," I say with a smile and laugh. "Surprisingly well, too. I got home early enough that she just thought I had been out with you the whole time." The day passes easily - as usual, Lucy and I work well together, coordinating tasks almost wordlessly at this point. After we close up and the cash register has been balanced, she sends the rest of the staff home, pulling me aside.

"Okay, deets. Did you see Hopper at the station?" I bite my lip and nod. She gasps. "Oh my god, did anything happen?"

"Nothing physical, though I'm sure I did my best to try and have something happen. But apparently we talked. A lot." The awkwardness of having this conversation is re-lived somewhat as I retell it. "He said that he is attracted to me, but that he doesn't want

to do anything for my own good, basically. Like he'll think he'll damage me, or something, by being obtuse and unavailable." She scoffs.

"That's ridiculous. What man isn't unavailable and obtuse." We share a laugh at that. "Did you tell him that was total bullshit and that he should live a little?" I shrug.

"I did my best. It, obviously, did not make a difference. But at least I know what he's been thinking, I guess." She purses her lips.

"Well, screw him. You need to get back out there, show him what he's missing! Don't you have the number of that cute college boy?" I consider that for a moment.

"Yeah, I do. I'll give him a call," I declare.

"Good," she says. But she has a mischievous glint in her eye that tells me she has some sort of scheme.

"Lucy..." I ask.

"What? I'm not saying he's going to become mind-numbingly jealous at hearing you went out on a date with someone else, and he definitely will hear," she says in an aside, "and realize his mistake in letting you go and rush back to sweep you off your feet and grovel for forgiveness." I roll my eyes at her antics.

"You've read one too many romance novel, Lucy," I say with a laugh. She means well, but I can't give myself the luxury of holding out hope for that. Hopper was very clear - he has no intention of entering into any sort of relationship with me. The sooner I accept that and move on, the better.

So, a few days later, after giving myself some time to recover from my night out and the emotional turmoil of my conversation with Hopper, I call up Josh, the guy who stopped by the bar.

On the third ring, a man's voice answers. I'm suddenly uncertain.

"Hi, um, is this Josh? This is Tricia, from the bar." God, I'm really out of practice with this stuff.

"Oh, hey, Tricia. It's good to hear from you! What's up?"

"Well, I was just wondering if you might want to get to know each other a little better. Like, on a date?" I say, wincing at how awkward I sound.

"I'd love to," he says. I can hear the smile in his voice - maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all. We plan to go out to dinner and movie next Saturday, and as the days pass, I find myself getting more excited than I thought I would be.

I drive to the restaurant, a nice but inexpensive place and meet Josh inside.

"Hey, how are you?" he greets me with a hug. I try not to startle too much at the affection - has my time lusting after Hopper left me this starved for physical touch?

"I'm good, thanks," I say as we part. "How has your summer been so far?" As the hostess seats us, we make small talk about the unusually cool summer. Silence stretches as we peruse the menu, and I find my palms sweating. Jesus, I'm really out of practice with this. I fight to keep my mind focused on the date and not spend every minute comparing him to you-know-who.

"Do you know what you're going to get?" he asks me.

"Yeah, the mediterranean salad looks good." He laughs. "Yes?" I ask, pressing for an explanation.

"Women are so predictable," he jokes. Is it too late to pretend I'm not feeling well? But outwardly I just fake a laugh. From there, the conversation doesn't improve much. When I ask him about himself, he has plenty to say, but he fails to ask me about my interests, and when I volunteer the information, he struggles with asking follow up questions, or he merely nods before finding a way to transition the conversation back to his interests. By the time we get the check and head over to the theatre for the latest James Bond movie - *Octopussy* - I breathe a sigh of relief. We now get to pass an hour without talking.

However, that relief disappears as the lights go down, and I feel a

hand creeping across my thigh. Reflexively, I grab his hand and pull it off me. Moderating the reaction, I then intertwine my fingers with his, our hands on the armrest between us. Dear *God* let this be a short movie. I barely know what the movie was about or whether I liked it - all I could think about was, much to my chagrin, that Hopper would never have gotten handsy like that. I don't know why he's so hard on himself when there's douchebags like this in the world.

As the lights come back on, I feign a stretch, giving me an excuse to drop his hand.

"What'd you think?" I ask as we gather our things.

"It was good. I thought some of the camera work was a little gratuitous," it's a good thing I'm in front of him so he doesn't see my eye roll. "But the acting was just spot on. You know, I'm a bit of an actor myself," he says, throwing his arm around my shoulders as we walk out of the theatre. *You can survive anything for ten seconds*, I remind myself to keep from causing a scene by shoving him off me.

"You don't say."

"Yeah, I'm practically famous at my college. Big heart-throb," he says with a cheesy wink. "So, little lady," he says in a horrifyingly bad British accent, "what do you say I show you my James Bond, and you can show me your Octo...pussy." It takes me a few seconds to decide how to react - I go with a fake laugh.

"Very funny, Josh," I say with a forced grin...that might end up more like a grimace. "Well, thanks for a lovely evening, but I have to be up again tomorrow, early. Really nice-great- getting to know you better." I blather. "Thanks again," I call while climbing into my car. I hurriedly drive off with a small smile and a wave.

"How was your date, honey?" my mom calls as I come home. I groan in response.

"Let's just say it reminded me why I don't like dating." She comes out of her room to greet me in the entryway as I'm tugging off my shoes.

"Not great?" she asks with an expression of sympathy.

"Not great," I repeat.

"I'm sorry to hear that." She wraps me in a hug. Things have been a lot more normal lately, and it's nice. "There's ice cream in the freezer if you need it, but I need to get to bed for work tomorrow, so try to keep the wailing down," she says with a teasing elbow.

"I think I'll be okay, but I accept ice cream at all times, so..." I head to the kitchen, glad tonight won't be a complete loss.

"Goodnight," she calls.

"Night!"

I don't think about my date with Josh again (other than lamenting to myself the loss of my evening a few times during my shift at work) until I work with Lucy next, about a week and a half after the date. He hasn't called, and I didn't really expect him to. I think we both understood we are not what the other is looking for.

"Hey, didn't you have your date with that college kid? How'd it go?" she asks me while we're wiping down tables. I give her the same reaction I gave my mom - a pained groan.

"I haven't had much worse. All he wanted to do was talk about himself, and you would not *believe* the pick up line he tried to use." When I retell it, British accent and all, she has to sit down she's laughing so hard.

"Jesus christ. Alright, we need to get you an *actual* man, not some tool masquerading as one."

"Tell me about it," I insist. But, I've been on my own for long enough, I've sort of gotten used to it. It's actually hard for me to imagine actually being with someone in a serious relationship. And it's not like anyone is spotting me for that anyways.

So, when the phone rings at 3 in the morning just as I was getting home from work, I'm baffled. Who the hell could that be? Curiosity getting the better of me and not wanting the ringing to wake up my mom, I pick up.

"Hello?" I answer in a low voice.

"Tricia, is that you? Thank god. I need your help."

"Josh?" I ask incredulously.

"Hey, yeah, it's me. I need a favor."

"Okay... Why are you calling *me*?"

"Look, I don't have much time, but can you come down to the police station? I'm in a bit of trouble, and I didn't know who else to call." He sounds distraught. I can't believe I'm about to do this. I sigh.

"Alright, I'm driving over now." I hang up on his emphatic thanks. This is too weird. But I guess I'll find out what's going on when I get there. As I'm turning down the road to the station, I realize that there's a chance I'll see Hopper. I almost reverse the car right there, traffic laws be damned. I haven't seen him since...our talk...but there's no way he'd be down there so late...or early, depending on how one looks at it. No, he's definitely drinking or sleeping, and I told Josh I'd be there, so I'll at least show up and see what he wants. If nothing else, it'll definitely make a good story.

Unsure of what I'm supposed to do, I just go up to the front door and hope someone will direct me. A tired cop on the nightshift is seated at the reception desk.

"Hi, I got a call from...a friend," I say uncertainly, "he didn't say what he needed, just asked me to come to the station."

"Your friend got a name?" he asks.

"Yeah, Josh. Josh," I struggle to remember his surname, "Harrington."

"Yeah, he's here, in the back. You bring bail money?" My eyes widen and my mouth drops open.

"Oh, yeah, he didn't tell you what he needed. Just sign in to the visitors log, and you can go talk to him, through the desk pen and to the right." I nod in thanks, sign in, and head back. Is it weird how often I've been at this station in the wee hours of the morning?

Probably.

I make my way back, and I see Josh and three other boys who look about his age in a holding cell. There's one cop back here, relaxing on a chair.

"What is going on?" I ask the herd of them.

"We got arrested," Josh mutters after some hesitation.

"No shit, Sherlock. What for?" I exclaim. No one answers.

"Possession of a controlled substance. Aka smoking weed," the cop pipes in.

"Thank you," I say to him. "Okay, geniuses, why am I here?" They all look amongst themselves.

"Well, we need someone to bail us out." I bark a laugh. Jesus, this boy really thinks he's all that, asking that much of someone who's practically a stranger. "I don't have the money on me, but I can give you my card, and you can drive to the ATM and bring it back. You just have to sign the papers too."

"And why would I go through this trouble?" I ask very slowly. Something tells me I won't like the answer.

"Well, I mean, you're, like, an artist right? We figured you'd have some empathy," he says with a shrug. I cock my head to the side, fighting down irritation. This assumptive little... Before I can ask my questions, a deep voice speaks behind me.

"What's going on here?" Hopper asks. My heart palpitates. I turn around with a smile that I hope conceals how uncomfortable I'm feeling. "Tricia? What are you doing here? I thought-" he cuts himself off. "What are you doing here?" he repeats.

"Josh called me." Hopper's eyebrows move up a fraction.

"Why you?" he asks skeptically. *I'm right there with you, pal.*

"I told you," Josh chimes in, "we're dating now," he says snidely. I

turn back around, giving him the clearest what-the-fuck expression I can muster. He makes his eyes big and nods a few times.

"Okay, what the hell?" Now I don't bother to conceal my irritation. "Fellas," I address the cops, "if you could give us a moment." My tone is clipped. Hopper nods at the officer, and they both leave the room. "Josh, we are not dating," I say very slowly and firmly.

"I know that," he hisses. "But Hopper is such a tool; it's fun to get under his skin." I shake my head in confusion.

"Why would you think I would be okay with you lying about me?"

"I mean, you slept with him, right?" I'm stunned silent.

"Who the hell is saying that?" He shrugs, now looking less assured.

"I dunno, everyone? I just figured you'd also want to get back at him..." I take a few moments to compose myself.

"Josh, allow me to spell out all the ways in which you have gone wrong tonight. First of all, I have no sympathy for you and your friends, because I don't make assumptions about people I barely know, and I certainly don't ask me to do favors for me based on that. Secondly, if I do, or did, smoke weed, I wouldn't be dumb enough to get caught." Now it's his turn to be shocked silent.

"Thirdly, if you're going to spread rumors about someone based on *other* rumors you heard, you should probably make sure it's okay with that person first. And you probably shouldn't, you know, lie about them, in front of them, while you're asking them to do you a favor." I pause for breath and to collect my composure. "Anyways, have a wonderful evening." I turn on my heel. "And by the way, I did *not* have a lovely time with you." With that and an eyeroll, I head out of the station as fast as I can. God, that was humiliating. I can't believe I came down here.

I'm signing out of the log book as fast as I can when I sense Hopper approach. God, I hope he doesn't gloat about how naive I was to come down here. Not that that seems likely, but god, would that be embarrassing.

"Don't worry, I'm just going to hold them for the night and then let them go."

"Why would I be worried?" I snap, still irate from my interaction with Josh.

"You're not-"

"Dating him?" I ask with a hint of a smile. "No, never was, *never* will. C'mon, Hopper, do you really think my standards are that low? Also, if it's not too much trouble, don't let them go in the morning. Keep them as long as you can." I finish signing. "Have a nice rest of your night," I say to Hopper and the cop on duty.

When I finally get back home, I throw myself into my mattress. Maybe if I just pretend that never happened, it will be erased from everyone's memory.

A/N: May seem like a bit of filler chapter, but I promise it'll be relevant :). Also, this assumes that Steve has an older brother (who is also an asshole).

16. The Moment We've All Been Waiting For

The Moment We've All Been Waiting For

The afternoon after the fiasco at the police station, I call up Lucy to relay all the different ways in which Josh is a tool, and we have a good laugh. I'm glad he'll be leaving town again in just a few short months - I really don't want to run into him around town. Living in fear of bumping into Hopper at the grocery store is bad enough.

Just a few days later, I nearly drop the glass I'm washing as Hopper walks into the bar. The place is pretty empty, but I'm still surprised when he approaches the bar instead of another customer. Of all the bars, why come here? I thought it was obvious we had to avoid each other after I made such an idiot of myself.

"Hey," he greets me.

"Hey," I say back, trying to keep the surprise and confusion from my voice while I turn around to get his usual beverage.

"Actually," he says, interrupting my reach for the bottle, "I didn't come here for that."

"Oh?" I turn back around empty handed.

"I was wondering if...", his deep blue eyes look unwaveringly at me. "Do you have a break any time soon?" I am a little fazed by this turn of events - first Hopper's appearance here after avoiding the place for a good couple weeks, but he has rejected a drink, and now he's asking when I have a break? I check my watch.

"I'm due for twenty minutes within the hour." He nods a few times, pulling out a cigarette.

"Would you be able to spare five of those twenty for me?" My eyebrows shoot up.

"I...sure, yeah." He just nods and leans back to light his cigarette. I turn to attend to a couple who just walked in, but I can barely hear their order. Five minutes...five minutes...what does he need from me

in five minutes? You can't do much of anything in five minutes - and I don't just mean sexually, though of course my mind immediately wants to hope that's a possibility. My anticipation makes the time pass slower as I turn a million possibilities over in my mind. Eventually, I can't stand the suspense anymore, and I head to the kitchen a little early.

"Marge, can you cover the front? I'm going on break."

"Sure thing, hun, but your food for your break isn't ready yet."

"No worries, I'll just grab something at the general store. Thanks!" I call while grabbing my purse. I come back out, approaching Hopper's seat at the bar. "So, the twenty minutes starts now," I say. He rises to his feet, and my heart is pounding. What on earth does he want?

"Would you like to grab some fresh air?"

"Sure." Wordlessly, we leave the bar, and he heads down the block for a bit before turning down the alley next to the bar. I follow him back, but he still hasn't spoken and that's making me more nervous.

"So, why did you come to- to the bar?" I almost made the mistake of saying "*to see me*." I don't actually know why he's here yet, and I don't want to presume anything.

"I have something to ask you," he answers, coming to a stop about halfway through the alley and turning to face me.

"Oh?" I ask while clutching at my purse strap.

"Yeah. I was," he exhales heavily. "This may be dumb. Hell, this is dumb. But I've already told you I think that, and you've made it clear you want to make your own decisions. And you've shown you're not half-bad at it, the way you handled that kid Harrington - though I do question why you agreed to go out with him in the first place."

"Jim, what are rambling about?" I ask while trying to stop a smile spreading over my face. Somehow, I think I know what he is going to ask, and my head is in the clouds.

"Would you like to go out with me sometime?" I examine his face,

looking for any trace of deception or sarcasm. Seeing none, I smile openly.

"Yes. Yes, I'd like that." He sighs and gives me a small smile.

"Cool." Suddenly, the warm summer air seems heavy between us.

"When are you free?" I ask quietly as my hands return to fiddle with my purse strap. He shrugs.

"Well, now, but obviously, you're busy." I nod with a sad smile.

"I get off at midnight tonight," I blurt out. He raises his eyebrows.

"There's not much to do around here after midnight." I feel my face growing warm.

"Yeah, I guess not."

"So, it doesn't sound like what you're proposing would be a date..." I glance away, down the alley, feeling my face blush. Did I come on too strong and now he is freaked out?

"I suppose that's true." I hear him move, and then his hands are on the back of my head, and my lips are pressed against his. My eyes are wide open in shock, but they quickly close, and I savor the kiss. His hands trail down my back to my waist, and I moan softly against his lips, melting against him. I wrap my arms around him, tangling my fingers in his hair, and I press my mouth to his. Slowly, he pulls back, leaving me gasping as I look into his eyes, so warm and tender. His hands are still on my waist, which I love.

"Sorry, I just," he runs one of his hands through my hair, "I have been wanting to do that for so long, and I didn't want to wait any longer." My breath catches, and my heart beats double time. It feels so good to be in his arms, more comfortable than is fair. *I'm going to fall so fast for this man*, rings in my head like an alarm, but I just smile at him, shaking my head slightly to clear it.

"I'm glad you didn't wait." I lay a hand against his chest and plan to kiss him again, but he moves away.

"Would you be terribly annoyed if we postponed that date?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, fearing he's already withdrawing again and has changed his mind about giving this a try.

"Maybe you could just come over tonight after work...and we go out some other time?"

"I'm good with that," I say with enthusiastic nods.

"Great, then, I'll see you tonight." He starts to walk away.

"Wait, I'm not sure I know how to get to your place," I say, scurrying after him.

"Oh, that's right. Here, I'll write down some directions." He grabs his notepad out of his pocket and jots down directions as he explains them to me. I'm really glad I remembered to ask. "And here's my phone number in case you get really lost and need to stop somewhere to call." I take the ripped out page, clutching it.

"Thank you, I'll see you later." I steal a glance around us, checking to see if anyone would notice if I reached up and kissed him briefly, but he must guess my intention as he is slightly shaking his head.

"I'd rather the rumors about us not flare up again," he says, giving me a wink. "Have a good day."

"You too," I call, feeling a sinking in my chest at his rejection of my kiss, but he had a good reason. I don't like the idea of people talking about me very much - and I dislike the idea of them spreading accurate information even more.

I barely remember to grab a granola bar before my break is up, I'm too busy wandering around the downtown area and appreciating the summer afternoon. God, what a beautiful day. When I get back to the bar, there's a new spring in my step. Every time I think about getting off work tonight, my heart beats faster.

A/N: Yay! They finally got to kiss! :) This is shorter than I hoped my next update would be, but things have been super busy. I hope you all enjoyed, and I promise the next update will be

longer!

17. Being a Mature Adult

Being a Mature Adult

With this addition of this chapter, I have changed this story rating to Mature. (Fitting, given the chapter title, thought that was not my original intention haha).

Though I feared my anticipation would make the day drag on, I find that replaying our kiss a thousand times in my head makes the time pass faster. I practically sprint out of the bar once I can finally lock up and head home. Except this time, I'm not going home, I'm going make out with the man I've been dreaming out about for *months*. I can barely believe it as I drive over, feeling like I've landed in an alternative reality where Hopper actually wants me. But, based on what he said this afternoon, by some miracle, he's wanted me for while.

When I finally pull up to his place, I'm nervous. I've built this up in my head so much - what if it's not as good as the times I've imagined it? What if he was right and this is a bad idea? What if my mom finds out? What if I hallucinated our conversation in the alley? Gah. I shake my head, kill the engine, and get out of my car with a deep breath. It's not like he's my first...he's just the first for a while. The nebulousness of our status, what this may evolve into (romance? dating? love?) adds to my nervousness.

I knock on the door. What matters right now is enjoying tonight. Everything else can be figured out in time.

"Come in," he calls. As I enter, I hear him shut off the TV. "How was work?" he asks, approaching me from across the room as I shut the door and take my shoes off. The air feels thick between us.

"It was good. Went faster than I hoped it would. Oftentimes, when I am anticipating getting off work, my shift goes slower. But that didn't happen today, which was good." I realize I am kind of babbling, and I swallow hard, looking him over. I drink in his height, his broad shoulders, his large hands. I quickly return my eyes to his, realizing my admiring gaze was obvious. He seems closer than he did before.

I'm very aware of his presence, just a few feet from me.

"Do you...want anything to drink?" he asks. With a flush, I notice the heat in his stare.

"No, I'm fine, thank you." I struggle to think how to transition to kissing him without it being awkward. I step a bit closer to him, and fighting a tremble, I run one of my hands up each of his arms, meeting behind his neck. He looks at me intensely, but he doesn't move down to kiss me, so I stretch to my tip-toes, hoping that will be a clear indication of what I want.

"How far do you want to go tonight?" he asks, his voice dark, instead of leaning down to kiss me. I'm startled back to flat feet, searching for solid ground amid a potentially awkward and treacherous question.

"Oh, I...I'm not really sure, I was just going to sort of see where things go....?" I trail off awkwardly. Maybe I should have tried to be more coy or seductive, but those have never been my strong suits. He nods a few times.

"It's just, if you want to have sex, we should talk testing and contraception." Oh, yeah, adult stuff. This isn't some teenage tryst where we don't think about the consequences until it is too late.

"I suppose we should have that conversation. I mean, I don't know if it'll happen tonight, but I would like to..." I bite my lip and look away, a little embarrassed for having voiced my desire while he's standing there statuesquely, practically uninterested. He captures my chin in his hand, tilting my head back to face him.

"I would like to, too. But I also don't want to push you or have us end up in a thorny situation." I nod, relishing the feeling of his skin against me, as his hand has now slid down to cup the back of my head. I have to try a little harder to form coherent sentences, the way sparks are shooting through me. And the way he is looking at me like he's about to devour me.

"I haven't been tested before, but I...have only had a few partners, and they were equally inexperienced," I volunteer. He nods.

"I was last tested a couple months ago, all came back clean. I haven't had too much exposure since then, but we should definitely use a condom if the time comes since I doubt you're birth control?" I shake my head.

"Yeah, I didn't see the point of dealing with the side effects." Damn this conversation, why won't he kiss me already? It feels strange to have such an intimate conversation with someone I have yet to be intimate with, even though of course that's the best time to have it, I remind myself sensibly. There's a pause. "Will you kiss me now?" I blurt out, regretting it and feeling immensely vulnerable until he leans down and does just that.

My eyes flutter closed as our lips meet, warm and sensual. His hands find my waist, pulling me close against him, and I'm grateful for his body and his support - I'm feeling shockingly light-headed and weak in the knees. He tastes of beer, but that's no surprise. At least I find the flavor unobjectionable. When his tongue brushes against my bottom lip, I have to stifle a moan at the contact before I gladly part my lips for him. I tangle my fingers in his hair, drawing his mouth harder against mine.

One of his hands moves lower, taking a firm handful of my ass, and this time I moan openly. *Fuck, I want this man.* Encouraged by my noise of appreciation, he pulls me flush against him, his hands gripping me tighter. Wanting, no, *needing*, more of him, I grind my hips against his, determine to release some of the tension burning between my thighs. He moans deep in his throat, the noise only edging me on.

When his hands grab my hips and he pushes his pelvis against me, I realize the mass in his jeans I was rubbing myself against so appreciatively was not his wallet or some other obstacle, but rather...*him*. My desire gets ratcheted up a few more notches, and I think I lose rational thought for a few seconds.

I break away with a muttered, "*fuck*," before taking his flannel shirt to task, though I find my fingers are fumbling with the buttons in their haste. His hands cover mine, stilling them. I look into his eyes to see he's just as flushed as I am.

"Do you want to go to my room?" he asks huskily. I immediately nod. He smiles wolfishly at me, grabbing one of my hands and leading me to his bedroom. This feels very significant, but of course I've been there before, though not when he was anywhere near this sober. And, Lord knows I'm not the first one to be there...though part of me is already dead-set to be the last. He switches on a light, and I settle on the bed, feeling slightly self-conscious under the heat of his gaze. He sits next to me, our legs lightly brushing.

"Where were we?" he asks, one of his large hands tracing up my thigh. I nearly melt into a puddle despite the barrier of my jeans.

"If I recall, you were kissing me into a stupor," I reply, trying, and failing, to conceal my breathlessness.

"Oh, that's right," he says with a wolf-ish smile. "I believe it went something like this." He bends his head down to meet mine, one hand cupping the back of my head. I reach one hand up to clasp on to his shoulder while the other grabs his shirt collar. His hand on my thigh draws my attention once more as he strokes it closer to where my thighs meet. My eyes flutter open as I make a noise somewhere between pleasure and alarm. He freezes and pulls away, eyeing me carefully. I flush under his scrutiny.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to - I didn't want you to stop. It's just been a while," I explain before he asks, feeling self-conscious of my limited experience.

"You don't need to apologize," he insists, shifting closer to me. I feel so small beside him, and I love it. "I don't want you to feel rushed at all. I want to make you feel good." I don't know if he does so consciously, but he emphasizes his remark with another caress on my thigh. I bite my lip and grab his hand, pushing it farther up my leg.

"You do," I whisper. "That might be part of the problem," I say with a laugh. "I want to do all sorts of things with you..." I smooth my fingers over the small patch of his chest peeking through the area of his shirt I managed to unbutton earlier.

"I'm very much looking forward to doing them with you," he replies, his thumb tracing my lips. I lean into the touch, desperate for more.

"But I don't want to rush you. Please, if you're ever feeling uncomfortable-"

"I'll tell you, I promise," I interrupt, hoping he'll stop talking and start kissing me again. He nods a few times and then bends down to kiss me again, softer this time. But I don't want soft. I grab his face, pulling him harder against me, and he responds in kind, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling him closer to him. One of his hands moves up from my waist to pause right below my breast, holding tight. With a moan of desperation, I reach down and move his hand to a more pleasurable location, and I feel his moan of appreciation as his hand finds my breast, filling his palm and applying just the right amount of pressure.

I move to my knees, intending to make him not have to bend so much to kiss me, when I realize an even better arrangement exists. Moving slowly so that I can continue to kiss him, I inch closer to him and bring my leg across his lap, shifting my weight so that I land on his lap. When I put one hand behind his head and the other on his back and then grind my hips against his, I am rewarded with a moan of appreciation. His hands drop to my hips and pull me against him. I repeat my thrust, and he rocks against me in return. We build up a good amount of friction like that before I break apart, breathless and aching to be naked beneath him. Let's start with naked.

I am able to make more progress on his shirt this time, and obligingly, he pulls it off before starting on me. His hands tug at the hem of my shift, pulling it over my head. Once my bra is bared, his hands return to my breasts in full, caressing and massaging, teasing me. I lean up to kiss him once more, running my hands over his bare chest and arms. I kiss him fiercely, and when one of his hands moves to grab my ass, I can't stifle the gasp of desire. I bite his lip, teasing him to be more aggressive, and he instantly obliges. With a twist and a pounce, he pushes me back on to his bed, and I gasp, giggling in surprise.

He gazes above me with heat in his stare, openly moving his gaze from my eyes down to my lips, down my neck, across my breasts. The hunger in his eyes fuels my own desire for him. Bringing his eyes back to mine, he moves his hands between my legs, separating them from where I drew them up and together when I fell back. I open for

him freely, his slow caress more torture than pleasure with my burning desire. He settles himself between my legs, propping himself up on his elbows, and he captures my mouth at the same time that one of his hands captures one of my breasts. I arch into his touch, rewarded to feel my hips brush against his - and that same prominent hardness that fills me with so much need. We kiss like that for a while in that heavenly position - me caressing his shoulders, arms, and back, while he takes his time completely freeing my breasts and familiarizing himself with my body with his hands and his lips.

"Jim," I gasp when his teeth nip at my collar bone in unison with a firm thrust against my sex. I clasp at his strong arms, grinding harder against the bulge of his manhood. But it's not enough. I reach down between us to grasp his zipper, but he eases off me enough to capture both my hands in one of his, and then he pins them up above my head. I'm shocked by how thoroughly aroused that makes me, and I writhe beneath him.

"Not yet, Trisha. I want tonight to be about you."

"Well, what I want is to touch you."

"Not yet," he whispers huskily against my ear. I squirm with need.

"Then will you touch me?"

"Gladly," he says with a grin. Still keeping my wrists pinned above me, he unbuttons and unzips my jeans, peeling them down far enough to access my sex. I realize, as I suck in a breath, that I am nervous to be touched by a man - no less Jim Hopper. But as soon as his fingers brush past my underwear to find my clitoris, my nervousness evaporates.

"Jim," I moan again. I can't believe how sensitive I am to his touch. Already he has me quivering with need. His fingers explore - left, right, in circles, down to tease my opening - and I'm moaning freely as pleasure jolts through me. He releases my wrists to pull down my underwear and completely remove my pants, and then I'm bared before him, completely naked. I should be self-conscious, but all I can think about is his fucking him and needing his hand back on me. Mercifully, he obliges my silent pleading, kissing me deeply while his

fingers return to his pleasuring.

As his fingers rub my clit, making me crazy, he inserts one finger deep inside me. I gasp into the kiss, arching my hips up to allow him better access, our bodies completely pressed together. I love the feeling of his bare chest on mine. Another finger enters me, thrusting intently while his fingers circle my clit. Suddenly, I see stars, and I break away from the kiss to scream his name while I orgasm around his fingers, panting as I come down.

"You liked that?" he asks unnecessarily. I nod, still struggling to calm my breathing.

"Your turn?" I ask, needing the answer to be yes.

"You're welcome to touch me, but I won't cum from your hand," he warns me.

"What about my mouth?" I ask with what I hope is a tempting smile. Eyes wide, he nods. "

Yes, please."

"Gladly." *To be continued...*

A/N: I'm sorry this update is so delayed! I've had a hectic summer, but I am now done with school, so I think I will finally have more free time to update regularly again. My original goal when writing this story was to catch up with the plot of the show before the new season came out...probably not going to happen now, but I'm going to do my best! As always, thank you for your reviews/favorites/follows. It means the world to me to know my writing is appreciated! I hope you liked this chapter! The next one won't be quite as smut-heavy (though obviously there will be some), but we'll also get some plot and a look at their respective emotions, I think!

18. The Right? Decision

The Right? Decision

Hopper's POV

As she licks her lips, gazing at me with open desire, I feel my heart skip a beat. Reflexively, I reach out and smooth her hair down, moving my hand down the crown of her head to the back of her neck.

"Tricia, you don't need to."

"Do you not want me to?" she asks, hand stalled on my zipper.

"No, I do want you to, I just...I don't want you to think you have to. I know many women don't love giving head, and I don't want you to feel like you have to just because I pleased you. I-" to my surprise, she cuts me off with a kiss - long, sensual - before breaking away with a smile.

"I want to," she says again, running her hands down my bare chest until her hands are at my zipper again. *Fuck yes.* I lay back on the bed with a sigh while she opens my jeans and frees my erection. At her slight gasp, I open my eyes to see her marveling at the sight of me.

"Oh, Jim," she murmurs, running her hands over me. I fight not to arch my hips into her touch. It's been too long since a woman touched me...and I've been battling my desire to have this *particular* woman touch me for far, far too long. I give her a small smile of encouragement while she's poised above the tip, her mouth teasing my head with kisses. A whisper at the back of my mind starts hissing all the reasons I shouldn't have given in to my desire for Tricia, but she then wraps her lips around me, and I can easily shove those doubts down. This is definitely the right decision...

I firmly believe that thought the entire time she is pleasuring me with her mouth and her hands, teasing me with her tongue and tormenting me with her throat, but after she brings me to a crushing orgasm that has me moaning and seeing stars, and she smiles contently before

laying down on my chest, the doubts seep back.

I wrap my arms around around her, dragging my fingers across her bare back and arms, relishing in her soft skin. *Young*. She sighs and lays a hand on my chest, snuggling closer. *Undamaged*.

"Thanks for a great night," she says with a smile. *Open. Trusting*. Her traits contrast sharply with my own. I sigh, and I think she can tell it's not a sigh of contentment. "Is everything okay?" she asks, raising her head off my chest, her forehead furrowed with concern.

"Everything's fine," I assure her, wrapping my arms around her and drawing her to my chest again. She hums contentedly while I try to banish these feelings of guilt and self-loathing. I need another beer. But I hadn't wanted to get too drunk earlier out of fear of not being able to perform for her. I lean down to kiss her on the head, and then I gently roll her off.

"I'm going to grab a beer. Want one?" I ask, hoping the question will prompt her to think about driving home, how late it is, and conclude she should leave. She stretches, exposing her breasts in the most alluring way.

"No, I should probably get going - it's late." Whether it was luck or my tactic worked, I try not to show my relief.

"Okay." I grab a beer while she finishes getting dressed, and then I walk her to the front door. "Drive safe," I say. I mean to leave it at that, but she drapes her arms around my neck and pulls me down for a kiss I can't resist sinking into - pulling her tight against me, running my hands over her curves. I pull away with the last of my self restraint. "I don't want to keep you from sleeping," I tell her, part of me hoping she'll feign being too tired to drive home, like any other woman would, to spend the night in my arms. I certainly don't have the fortitude to tell her no, even though every rational thought is warning me against rushing into this emotionally.

"You're right - I should get home. Call me," she whispers into my ear. With a peck on the cheek, she's out the door. I down the rest of my beer and call it a night. We didn't even have sex, I remind myself. So it's not like this is anything serious. Right now, all we're doing is

hooking up. That's nothing to panic over...but I can't shake the fear that I'm going to break her heart and shatter her spirit.

He offered to have me stay for a drink afterwards, so I why do I feel like he was pushing me to the door after we finished hooking up? I ruminate in my shower. I could have accepted his offer to stay...but I didn't, and even though he was patient and attentive sexually, I can't help feeling a little used. I don't know why - *I'm* the one who suggested going straight to hooking up...he was just so distant and cold afterwards. And clearly not fine. My heart sinks - is he having second thoughts about being with me, even just physically, already?

I shake my head to clear it, hoping to shake off my feelings of dread as well. Damn, we're not even dating (yet?), and this is complicated. No wonder Hopper was so wary, I think sardonically. Well, if he's having second thoughts, he can have them. Despite his brusqueness afterwards, I'm quite satisfied with the evening, and I want to see him again. It's going to take more than boorishness to scare me away...especially after how hard he made me cum.

The next day, I wake up after my mom has already left for work, so luckily I don't have to lie about when I got home or pretend I'm not as tired as I am. At work, I feel like I have *I'm hooking up with Hopper* stamped on my forehead, but apparently no one else can see it. And, as the day goes on and I realize I am not a fundamentally different person for having been with Hopper, I relax and am able to, by and large, put him from my mind. I do consider calling Lucy as soon as possible and giving her all the details, but I realize the sooner I tell anyone, the sooner I risk it becoming public knowledge. Granted, he did ask me on a date - as soon as we are seen together in a romantic context, I'm sure the whole town will know. And when that happens, my mother will know... Assuming I see him again, I'll have to face that moment eventually, but I'd rather wait until I know for sure I'm going to see him again before fighting that battle.

19. What Happens in Darkness

What Happens in Darkness...

The next day I'm at work, to my surprise, Hopper strolls in. My heart catches a little at the sight of him, but I busy myself to conceal my reaction. He sits at the bar, a few places down from the other customers, and I give him a smile, which he returns with a cool nod. I turn around to grab his bottle of choice while my stomach sinks. Is this how all the other women felt, those women he warned me about, whom he had been with and left feeling used and miserable? Thank god I didn't sleep with him. I pour him the drink and quickly turn my back to him again, taking a few seconds to fully compose myself. By the time I've turned back around again, he's drained the glass and looking at me for seconds.

As is typical for us, I pour him another without a word. Looks like we are back to status quo. I go to move on to the other customers, but he calls my name.

"Tricia, how are you?" he asks. Nevermind about status quo. The words sound stiff in his mouth, almost as if the phrase is unfamiliar to him.

"I'm doing well, thank you." I hope my voice sounds normal, and not suggestive of the fact that my heart is beating double time. "H- how are you?" I ask, and I'm aware that I probably sound just as unsure as he did, if not more.

"I'm alright," he replies, fiddling with the whiskey tumbler. I open my mouth to ask another question, but he preempts me. "I don't mean to monopolize your time. You should see to your other customers." I nod, fighting the urge to brush his hand with mine while I walk away. Was that a rebuff or was he attempting to prevent me from feeling obligated to give him preferential treatment? As alluring as his mysterious nature is, it makes it nearly impossible to read him. I try to put him from my mind as I serve the other customers, but my thoughts and my gaze keep drifting back to the man alone at the counter.

Every free moment I spend close - but not so close as to arouse interest in the other patrons or make him feel smothered - to Hopper's barstool. I hope my intention is clear - I'm here if you want to talk - but he does not start a conversation. He gestures for the check, and as we're settling his tab, the customers that are here go crazy over a development in the baseball game on the TV.

"I still owe you that date," he says just loud enough I can hear him over the commotion. It takes a few rapid heartbeats before I can formulate a response.

"I would like that. I'm off tomorrow night," I offer.

"Great. I'll pick you up at eight," he says quietly as the background noise has died down. I nod and do my best to contain my smile from becoming a beam. As he heads for the door, I yank my eyes away so I'm not seen staring at him. I can appreciate the subtlety, but I wonder if he's doing it for my sake or his. He's obviously a private person, and I'm sure he doesn't relish being the subject of town gossip, though if it really bothered him, he'd probably take pains to conceal his drinking. The fact that he doesn't makes me want to think he's attempting to prevent the rumor mill from running about me. Which is quite considerate, really. The glow of his efforts vanishes as my head comes back from the clouds.

There will be no stopping the rumor mill once he and I are seen together. I'll have to tell my mom before it can get going. In fact, considering she'll most likely be home tomorrow when he picks me up, I will in all likelihood have to tell her tonight. But what if he backs out at the last minute and she can tell me she told me so? My mind runs through the possibilities - be outside so he doesn't have to come to the door, call him tomorrow at work before opening to tell him I'll meet him somewhere, lie about why he's picking me up...I just need to tell her. I resign myself to the fact and vow to come up with a way to address it later. I've got time. The person I really need to tell is Lucy. I smile to myself about how excited she'll be. I'll call her tonight since my mom has her bookclub.

When I get home, I check my mom's room before dialing Lucy's number, which I've memorized by now. She picks up on the third ring.

"Lucy speaking," she answers.

"Hey, Lucy, it's me. I have news." I think she can tell from the sparkle in my voice what it's about since she squeals.

"Spill," she adds mock-seriously.

"So, Hopper came in to the bar a couple days ago...and he asked me on a date!" She screams so loudly I have to hold the phone away from my ear.

"Fucking FINALLY. Ugh, I'm so glad he came around to see how awesome you are! So, when are you going to see him?"

"Well, I saw him that night, but it wasn't strictly a date..."

"Girl!" she squeals encouragingly. "How was it? More importantly, how was he?"

"It was good. He was pretty damn amazing," I say with a chuckle. I'm quiet for a minute, as I debate whether or not to tell her about my reservations, but then I take a leap of trust. "It was good, but I am a little worried that he doesn't...I dunno. After we hooked up, I felt sort of like he pushed me toward the door." She sighs. "But, he actually came into the bar today, and he made a date with me - he's picking me up at my house tomorrow at eight."

"I mean, it's Hopper. I'd be surprised if everything was sunshine and rainbows." She's matter-of-fact, but the tone contrasts harshly with the glee in her voice earlier. "Honestly," she lowers her voice, "the fact that he came to see you today is like...biblical in significance. He's not really a call-you-back kind of guy."

"Yeah, I know that about him." I realize though, that Lucy might know even more than I do. "Lucy, do you know what happened with his last relationship? He alluded that it didn't end well, but I don't know any other details."

"Oh, yeah, poor Marissa. She tried to make it work with him - and she put up with a whole lot of his shit. It was the talk of the town how often she ended up waiting for him in restaurants, how he never showed up to her dinner parties or family functions." Her voice is

quiet, sad. "But," she says, brightening considerably, "I honestly think he's been doing better lately. And, I mean, you guys are casual for now."

"Yeah, I think that's for the best." I sigh and lean against the wall. "I was going to tell my mom, before he comes to pick me up tomorrow...but I don't know if it's the best decision."

"Your mom who called him a degenerate and drunkard? You were going to tell that mom?" I twist the cord in my hand.

"I mean, better she hears it from me than a coworker, right?"

"I dunno. I'd at least see how tomorrow goes. If it's a flop and you'll never see him again, maybe she'll never know." Her never knowing would be ideal...but I do most certainly want to see Hopper again.

"I'll think about it. Anyways, enough about me. How are things with Jerry?" That's her highschool sweetheart who just moved back to the area. We chat about life for a good half hour before I hear my mom pull into the driveway, and I hurriedly say goodbye - I don't want to have to answer any questions.

That night, it takes some time before I am able to go to sleep - I stare unseeing at the ceiling for at least an hour trying to decide if I should come clean, and I fall asleep before I come up with an answer.

In the morning, I decide that while I'm getting ready tonight, I'll lock myself in the bathroom until 7:59 PM and just hope for the best. I don't want to face another fight. And so, after a quiet dinner while we discuss the latest neighborhood controversy - the Hansons have bought another sports car that crowds the street even though we all know they're having money troubles - I excuse myself to my, thankfully private, bathroom and work on a simple up-do and light make up. If I'm lucky, I can get in and out without raising too many questions. I can't face another fight with my mom, especially if the date is a bust and the fight was for nothing.

At exactly 7:59, I see headlights swing into the driveway. Thank you, Hopper, for being punctual.

"Mom, I'm heading out. Be back in a bit," I call over my shoulder. I hear her stammer a confused response and bite back interrogations about where I'm going and who I'll be with, but then I slam the door and am hopping into Hopper's truck.

"You look very nice," he says simply but sincerely as he's reversing out of the driveway. I went with a 60's inspired blue and white polka dot dress.

"Thank you," I mutter with a blush. He's wearing a Hawkins PD t-shirt and jeans. "You look nice too," I reply, my hand reaching over to brush across his fingers on the stick shift. A hunger flashes in his eyes, and I think for a second, we both are tempted to screw the date and then each other, but the tension dissipates. He swallows hard.

"Thank you." It's quiet for a few seconds while he navigates the neighborhood. "So, do you want to know where we're going?"

"Yes, of course," I say with a laugh. He knows me well enough to know I don't like not knowing things, but he doesn't answer my unspoken question. "So, where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," he tells me cheekily. "Don't worry, you'll know soon enough. It's not too far of a drive." I fake a pout which makes him crack a grin, and then I flip through the radio. We turn on to the highway, flying down the country road with the windows open and the rock music blasting. I look over at him, looking adorable while singing along and tapping on the steering wheel, I feel the wind rushing around me, and I let out a laugh of joy. What a wonderful evening. He looks over at me, questioning.

"You're very cute," I say as explanation. "And I'm having a great time already."

"I'm glad. I like being with you, Tricia," he says, taking his eyes off the road for far too long, but I don't care.

"I like being with you, too, Hopper." There's a comfortable pause. "But I would still like to know where we're going," I tease.

"Don't worry, it's not too much farther."

"And why the journey?" I ask. If my hunch is right, it's to lower the likelihood someone sees us together. But I want him to say it. Once I figure that out, I can then deal with trying to determine the significance of it.

"You know," he says simply.

"Tell me anyways?" He turns off the highway to a deserted dirt road. Where are we even going? I see a brightly-lit shack a few hundred feet farther down.

"Well, this is the best ice cream shop in the whole state. I had to take you here."

"No way," I laugh. We went out here for ice cream?

"And, you know," he adds quietly, "I know I'm not the kind of guy a mother wants her daughter to bring home. Or even hanging out with. So I figured I'd spare you the grief. Or at least try to. This place is still pretty popular, so there might still be someone who recognizes one of us."

"That's very considerate of you, Hopper." I lay my hand against his again, and his eyes jump from the road to mine. That hunger is in them again, a fire that briefly threatens to consume me. And I want it to.

"Well, let's get ice cream," he interrupts the moment, sharply pulling off the road and jumping out. A little dazed by his sudden change in mod, I follow him out. The stand is quaint, hand-painted and in need of repairs, but when our ice cream comes - caramel swirl for me and chocolate for Hopper - my doubts about this little adventure vanish. As we eat, we walk around the open field near the shack, making our way by star and moonlight.

"Thank you for the ice cream. And for taking me here. It's a beautiful night."

"I'm glad you like it." To my surprise, his hand grabs mine. I stifle a gasp at how strong and warm they are. I feel so safe being connected to him. "So, tell me, why on earth did you date that Harrington boy?"

I laugh.

"You want to talk about that?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes! I've wanted to ask you since I first heard that you two had gone out. I couldn't believe it."

"Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't I what?"

"Why didn't you ask me - when you first heard he and I had gone out?" I ask quietly. He shrugs somewhat awkwardly.

"I didn't think you would...appreciate me making inquiries into your dating life. And at that point, I was still convinced that we shouldn't, you know, be together in any way, and I didn't want you to think I was wavering in that - even though, I mean. I saw red when I learned you went on a date with him." I lean up against him and squeeze his hand.

"Aw, Hopper, that's sweet. I'm glad you changed your mind. And I want you to know that you can ask me anything."

"Alright, then answer my question," he teases.

"Oh, right, sorry. I went on a date with Josh because, well, I didn't really have any other takers," I say with a light elbow to his side. "And I figured I should be dating. I hadn't dated or been with anyone since I had broken up with my boyfriend in Indianapolis..." I walk him through my dating history, which doesn't take too long, and we end up back at his car. He drives us to a nearby lake, and we sit on the hood of his car, staring up at the stars, while he tells me more about his history.

"After high school, I left for Indianapolis. I wanted to start new, and that was the best place I could think of."

"Why'd you want to leave?" Our hands are entwined, and I squeeze him lightly every time I ask him something I think might be upsetting.

"I was young, and I wanted to see a bit more of the world and break out of the mold you end up pushed into in a small town - you get a certain reputation, and everyone ends up continuing to see you the same way, treating you the same way."

"And what was your reputation?" I ask with a smile, turning on my side and propping myself up on elbow to gaze at him.

"A football jock," he admits, "who was...a bit of a player," he tells me with a grin.

"I don't know why I'm surprised," I say with an eye roll, leaning down to kiss him. He moans softly, and his hands tangle in my hair and pull me closer. I run my hand over his broad chest, his strong shoulders. Eventually, we break apart.

"What about you?" he asks softly. "What was your reputation in high school?" he asks softly. I laugh.

"It probably won't surprise you - a goody-two shoes artsy weirdo."

"Hmm, we didn't have any artsy weirdos in my class, but I understand the stereotype in theory," he says with mock seriousness. "Plenty of goody-two shoes though," he adds. "So, is that why your mom is so uptight about you doing anything polite society wouldn't approve of?" His hand strokes mine.

"Yeah, she didn't have to deal with a rebellious teenager, so this is all new to her."

"Well, I'm personally of the theory that you don't learn in life without making mistakes." I raise my eyebrows.

"You think this is a mistake?" I ask in small voice. His eyes flick to me, looking worried for a moment.

"No, I didn't mean...I mean, you mom definitely would think it's a mistake. Pretty much anyone you'd ask in town would."

"Well, I don't think it is. And I don't plan to ask them." His arm wraps around my waist, pulling me closer.

"I'm lucky you're willing to make up your own mind about me. Not push me into a mold."

"Of course not. You can count on us artsy-weirdos not to put people into boxes," I joke, making him laugh.

"You're very clever, you know," he says, fingers brushing my cheek. "I like that about you." I blush under his touch and his gaze.

"I like that you like it. There's been more than a few men who were frightened off by my sharp tongue."

"Good. They didn't deserve you." The heat of his gaze and his intimate words make my breath catch. I lean in for another kiss, and there tenderness of our previous kisses has been replaced by a burning tension. His fingers caress my arms, my legs, and I swear I feel sparks. I moan softly, and he gathers me into his arms, pulling me on top of him, and running his hands all over my body. Between us, I can feel a rising hardness, and I move my hips against it and am rewarded by a soft moan.

One of his hands moves up underneath my skirt, moving to grab my ass, and I moan in both surprise and pleasure. I grind harder against his erection, and he gives my ass a squeeze, pushing me against him. I run my fingers through his hair and down his neck while he finds his way past my underwear to tease my most sensitive areas. And tease he does.

In minutes, I'm panting and quaking, grabbing fistfulls of his shirt while he artfully brings me to climax after climax.

"Jim," I cry out after a particularly powerful release, holding tight on to his body and panting against his neck before leaving a trail of quick kisses. "Jim," I say again, reaching down to grab his wrist, stilling him. "Darling, I need a breather," I say, clearly breathless.

"Alright," he says, clearly reluctant. "It's so amazing to pleasure you though - you're so expressive. It's so sexy to watch you." I kiss him long and hard and then lie my head down on his chest, moving my hand in circles on his chest.

"I'm glad you think so. But I want to make you feel good - physically - too." I trail my hand down to his zipper, rubbing him through his pants. He kisses me deeply, holds me tightly.

"Can I take you back to my place?" he asks, voice raspy. I nod enthusiastically. He hops of the hood of his truck, extending a hand to help me down, and we rush back into the truck and speed down the highway. As Hopper drives, I peer over at him, my heart pounding and my stomach flipping. *Jim Hopper. I'm on a date with Jim Hopper*, I think to myself. And what an amazing date. And I realize, looking at his profile and his body and remembering his words...I really want to have sex with him. I want it tonight.

20. Always Comes to Light

...Always comes to light

As we're driving back to Hawkins, I keep fidgeting in my seat, fiddling with the radio, and fiddling with my hair.

"What's gotten into you?" Hopper jokes. I look at him, and, briefly considering the ramifications of doing so, I tell him the truth.

"I want to have sex with you." He looks over at me, wide eyed, and he nearly drives the truck off the road.

"Oh," he replies once the truck is righted.

"Is that...is that something you also would like to do?" I ask. He laughs, startling me.

"Of course it is. Tricia, you're fantastic. Of course I want that." His hand reaches out to cover mine. I blush at his words and his touch. Waiting at a stoplight, we gaze into each other's eyes, and my heart flutters. I can't believe he ever tried to keep this from me.

"Chief, we've got a 704 down at the Hideaway," a young mans voice interrupts through the radio. Hopper groans. "Chief, do you copy?" With a long suffering sigh, he picks up the receiver.

"Hopper here, I copy. What do you need me there for?" There is a moment of silence while I hold my breath, praying that the officer is being overly needy and that Hopper isn't needed.

"Tom says that you owe him a favor," the officer says, somewhat sheepishly. Hopper puts the receiver down and mutters a string of curses.

"Can we reschedule?" He asks me. I nod, fighting to not let my disappointment at the interruption ruin my night.

"What's a 704?" I ask. He looks over at me, face set into stone.

"Underage drinking."

"Oh." The Hideaway is another bar in the area - one of our competitors. I want to know what favor Hopper would owe the owner, but I also am not sure he wants to share the circumstances that led to the favor. No doubt they weren't pretty.

"So, this favor...he's probably going to leverage it to get you to drop the charges, right?" He sighs.

"Yeah, probably." It's silent for a while as he navigates to my house.

"Will you?" I finally bring myself to ask.

"Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to," he answers gruffly. A number of responses come to mind - admonishing bending the law, assuring him I can handle the grittiness of his profession and decisions, and rebuking him for patronizing me. I go with the last one.

"Jim, I know I'm younger than you, but that's no excuse to treat me like a child."

"What?" He sputters.

"You can't just shut me up with that trite phrase. And if your intention wasn't to shut me up and instead shelter me - screw that too!"

"I don't have to tell you everything about myself," he counters, voice raised.

"I never asked you to! But don't obfuscate things just because you think I can't handle it." There's a tense silence. But when he next speaks, he's calmer.

"I didn't say that because I didn't think you could handle it. I said it because I didn't want to admit my debt, or...look, you admitted yourself tonight that you're a goody-two-shoes. I didn't want to offend you. Or deal with a lecture."

"First of all, if you recall, I said that was true in High school. It's been a few years since then," I tease. "And if you recall, I work in a bar. I've heard my share of scandal and seen a good amount of

debauchery. Am I happy to hear about how you're planning on dealing with Tom? No. But I'm not your conscience or your mother, and I don't want to be. You're a grown man and can make your own decisions. We're," I hesitate slightly, "friends, and I don't want you to feel like you need to hide things from me." He gives no response, so I allow myself to silently fume at his cold shoulder until he starts chuckling.

"That is not what I expected we would fight about in this situation." His laugh brings a smile to my face.

"I'm glad I can keep you on your toes." I run my hand down his arm.

"Oh, you definitely do." The air of electric tension has returned, and I know we both consider blowing off all our responsibilities and heading back to his place to completely destroy each other. But then we're turning down my street, and reality comes back.

"I had a really nice time with you, Jim."

"I'm glad." He pulls into my driveway, and a sadness settles on me in anticipation of his loss. "I had a nice time with you too," he adds quietly.

"I'm glad," I echo him. "Have a good rest of your night."

"You too," he calls as I'm climbing out of his truck. I wait for him to drive away before heading inside. I couldn't bear to part sooner than we had to. I do hope he doesn't let the Hideaway's owner off scott-free just because he owes him a favor, but this is a good reminder of the type of man I'm dealing with - one with baggage. As kind as he can be, he's no saint. But, if anything, that's one of the things I like about him. He has an edge to him. Not like the pseudo Rebels-without-a-cause like Josh Harrington. I gaze down the street where his truck went, longing to have gone with him. I could have made up an excuse to stay - maybe I'm interested in pursuing a career as a police officer. In the best possible way, there is something intoxicating about his presence. But, I tear myself from the driveway and head inside to return to the much less exciting version of my life, the one where Hopper and I are hardly more than acquaintances.

I walk in as quietly as possible, trying not to wake my mom if she's asleep, and if she isn't asleep, I hope I can make it to my room without her seeing me looking cute or asking me where I was.

"Honey, is that you?" she calls from the living room.

"Hey, Mom, yeah, it's me," I call back, hurrying to my room.

"Hold on now, I feel like I've barely seen you today," she says, rounding the corner. "What have you been up to?" she asks cheerfully.

"Oh, you know, this and that."

"Did you go out with friends tonight?" I hesitate for half a heartbeat while I decide if I should be honest or not.

"Yeah. It was nice." I turn, trying to escape to my room.

"What'd you do?" she's still smiling, so it doesn't seem as if she suspects anything, but my heart is pounding.

"We got ice cream," I answer honestly. "It was really good. We should go there sometime - it's a little far out though."

"And who'd you go with - Lucy?"

"No, not Lucy. She was busy tonight. I went with someone else I know from work." She hums thoughtfully, and I turn to go to my room, relieved she didn't press for more details.

"So, the call I got from Mrs. Jones about seeing you in Hopper's truck was just idle gossip?" Her voice is so even, I have to replay what she said to make sure I heard her correctly. A saying I heard long ago echos in my mind: *What happens in darkness always comes to light*. I turn back around, slowly, and I know my face reveals the truth. "Tricia!" she scolds me. "What did we talk about about you spending time with him?" She's so aghast, it's almost funny. She's acting like he's Satan himself.

"We talked about how you didn't approve of it," I reply evenly.

"Yes! Tricia, he's no good. The things I hear about that man...you will completely ruin your reputation if you hang out with him!"

"I don't *care* about my reputation, Mom! This isn't high school, and I'm not some teenage girl who cares more about what other people say about her than being happy and being true to herself! I *like* Hopper. He gets me, and I get him." I fold my arms over my chest. She sighs and puts her hand to her chest, leaning against the wall.

"What am I going to tell people, Tricia? I thought we had moved past this," she mutters. "I thought you had gotten it out of your system, had seen the type of man he is-"

"I know what type of man he is, Mom. And I *like* it."

"I can't believe this is happening." She sounds so exasperated, I almost feel badly for ignoring her wishes. "I thought you knew better than to get involved with a man like Hopper. Honey, he is going to break your heart!" she exclaims, her voice cracking. It's then that I realize her eyes have welled up with tears.

"Oh, Mom," I rush forward to hug her tightly as I realize a few things at once - she's not trying to be controlling for the sake of it, she's just trying to look out for me. And I think she's so concerned because my father drank heavily during the final years of their marriage - no doubt she associates alcoholism with being unfaithful. "I understand why you're concerned. And I'm sorry that being involved with Hopper will make me the subject of town gossip. But I'm an adult, and I need to make my own decisions. I didn't take many risks when I was a kid or venture off the beaten path," she nods enthusiastically. "And I need to. I need to explore and make my own path. I may fumble and make mistakes, but I want to. It's part of growing." She sighs heavily and then hugs me again.

"You're very wise. I'm sorry I forget that sometimes. I just...I don't want you to get hurt. And with a man like Hopper, you're asking for it." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be so pessimistic," I lay a hand on her arm.

"It's okay. Thank you for recognizing that," I say with a smile. "But it's okay." I turn to head to the bathroom, but she calls after me.

"Honey, I'll always be here for you. I won't tell you I told you so or chide you. I just wanted you to know that."

"Thanks, Mom." I give her smile, but I'm a little confused by her timing.

The next morning at work, the few customers that do come in seem positively transfixed by me. I just roll my eyes. At first I thought I was imagining it, but the stares and quiet whispers among patrons is definitely out of the norm. I do my best to shrug it off, but the stares make my skin crawl. Word really travels fast in this town. The phone ringing interrupts my thoughts.

"Big Wig bar, how can I help you?" I answer robotically.

"Hey, it's me." I fight to control the shock and joy that rushes through me at the sound of Hopper's deep voice on the other end of the line. There's a thousand different things I want to ask him and tell him, but I'm very conscious of the handful of customers. They appear to all be engrossed by the game, but I don't want to take any chances of adding fuel to the gossip.

"Hey," I answer simply, concealing my fluttering heart and racing pulse.

"You've got customers? You don't have to answer - I figured as much. I just wanted to hear your voice, and I- I'm sorry, it seems we weren't as subtle as we thought." I have to suppress a laugh.

"Yeah," I answer simply. But I make sure my tone shows I'm not annoyed.

"How are, what I mean is,...do you know if your mom knows?" The simple fact that Hopper thought of that, that he cares enough to ask, sets my heart racing.

"Yeah. And yeah."

"Well, shit. How'd she take it?" I want to tell him everything, but I need to keep my end of the conversation vague to prevent eavesdroppers from knowing it's Hopper I'm talking to.

"Better than expected." He hums thoughtfully.

"I'm glad to hear that. I won't keep you. I just...I was thinking about you a lot." I can't stop a grin from spreading across my face.

"Same here," I say softly.

"I'd like to see you again soon. Are you free tomorrow night?"

"No, but the following."

"Great, I'll pick you up. See you then."

"Yep. Bye." I hang up the phone and have to fight to keep from jumping from joy. After our disagreement, at the back of my mind, was the fear that I wouldn't hear from him again. I'm glad that proved untrue. He called me. He friggin' *called* me. Because he wanted to hear my voice. And check in on how I'm doing...I can hardly believe it. I can feel my doubts and fears about him slipping away and my affection for him soaring into infatuation. It makes it significantly easier to tolerate the stares and whispers.

When Lucy arrives to join me for the evening rush, she grabs my arm and wordlessly drags me to the store room. I offer nominal resistance about leaving the bar unattended, but the place can handle itself for a couple minutes.

"Oh my god, how does literally everyone know about your date?"

"One of my neighbors saw me in his truck." I shake my head with frustration. "I don't get why everyone cares so much," I say with a sigh. She shrugs.

"I dunno. Everyone knows Hopper - he's somewhat of a local public figure. And I mean...the fact that you two aren't exactly..." I raise my eyebrows.

"We're not exactly what?" She gestures helplessly as she tries to find the words.

"Look, you're not really the type of woman people pictured Hopper would go for with any...not the type of woman people think he'd be

compatible with to date." She elaborates as I stare at her with confusion. "People here see you as young and...you know, pure. The girl next door."

"Oh. So that adds to the fascination." She nods.

"People assumed he'd go for someone hardened like him or wild - like a biker chick or something. The age difference doesn't help either," she adds softly. I digest this. I suppose if I lived in a small town without much to do and the local drunk sheriff was dating someone ten years younger than him without a spot on her reputation (other than dating him), I'd be pretty fascinated by it to.

"I suppose that makes sense. So, should I be more hardened, more badass, to lessen the rumors?"

"No," she exclaims. "No, you absolutely can't do that - or people will say he changed and corrupted you. Honestly, I'd just keep things as low-key as possible, and it will die down eventually. The less they have to talk about, the better." I nod, absorbing this.

"Thank you. You're such a good friend." We hug tightly and head back to work. I find that having a friend beside me makes the customer stares easier to deal with. And Lucy is phenomenal. When a customer is particularly blatant, she calls them out mercilessly.

"Can we help you, ma'am?" she calls to one customer at a table across the room who has had her eyes glued on me, appraising me, for the past ten minutes. The woman sheepishly shifts her attention. "No, nothing?" Now most of the customers in the, now crowded, bar have turned to look at her, albeit briefly. Lucy and I exchange a glance of amusement. And I smile my thanks. And knowing that I get to see Hopper in under 48 hours makes it all so much easier to bear.

A/N: Hope you all enjoyed the latest chapter! And the new season of Stranger Things! (OMG I loved it). I have the story sketched out through the second season, so we will get to see Hopper and Tricia beyond just the events of the first season.

Also, credit to the amazing Netflix show Chewing Gum for the past two chapter titles. I got the phrase "What happens in

darkness always comes to light," from that show. Though it is a relatively common saying, I wanted to give it a shout-out. :)

21. The Second Date

*This chapter is absolutely rated M...

The Second Date

I spend the next day working and heading straight home. I'm certain that if I ventured to the grocery store or out and about, strangers would approach me for details of my relationship with Hopper. And I'm not ready to deal with that with any semblance of politeness. So I figure better to lay low than make enemies.

I wait breathlessly for Hopper to pick me up. Like last time, he didn't give me any indication of what we'll be doing, so I wear a sundress. Except this one is a little more low cut and tighter. Considering *my* plans for the evening, it's more than appropriate.

When I get in his truck, his mouth actually drops open a little. After a few heartbeats, he recovers and his gaze makes it back up to my eyes.

"Hey, how are you?" he asks, giving me his most charming grin. My stomach flips with anticipation and desire.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"I'm great." He pulls out of my driveway fast enough that I have to grab on to the hand hold for stability.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to my place. I have a surprise."

"Oh?" I ask with a smile. I try to be nonchalant but my thoughts are racing. Candles? Roses? Sexy jazz music? Based on his driving, whatever it is, he's excited. When we get to his place, he jumps out of the car to get my door for me and extends his hand, helping me down.

"Why, thank you, sir," I kid. He puts his hand on the small of my back while he leads me inside and then heads to the kitchen while I take off my shoes. He's holding something behind his back when he

returns.

"Ready for your surprise?" I nod enthusiastically. He pulls a bottle of wine out from behind him, showing me the label. I quickly make out the distinctive label - this is from my favorite winery, a rare find. I haven't had a bottle from them since I left Indianapolis.

"How did you know?" I exclaim, grabbing the bottle with disbelief..

"You told me, once. One of the first times we went. I had asked you to join me for a drink of whiskey, and you told me you preferred wine. We talked wines for a while - I took you for a real sommelier." I laugh, remembering the conversation now. I can't believe he remembered that conversation (he was heavily intoxicated) or what brand I said was my favorite. Then again, Hopper has shown an impressive memory.

"I'm honored you remembered - and flattered you went through the trouble to get this! Thank you very much." He shrugs.

It wasn't too much trouble - one of the deputies went to the city last weekend, and I had him bring back a bottle." I raise my eyebrows.

"I'm sure he thought that was an odd request." Hopper has made it very clear to me, and most, that he drinks only beer and whiskey - he despises wine.

"I'm sure," he agrees with a laugh. "Well, would you like some?"

"Yes, very much so!" I follow him into the kitchen while he pours me a glass into a whiskey tumbler - I wouldn't expect to find a wine glass at his place. He cracks open a beer while I take my sip. I sigh with pleasure as I lean back and close my eyes. Not only does it have a delicious flavor with just the right bite of alcohol, it reminds me of home. "Here, have a sip." He makes a face of disgust, but I make a face of pleading. "Please, just so you know what it was I wouldn't shut up about?" That makes him chuckle and seems to win him over.

"If you insist." He takes the tiniest sips, makes the same grimace I would make if I drank some of his whiskey, and hands the glass back to me. "Thanks for trying it," I tell him with amusement in my voice. I

take another hearty sip, and I reach my hand out to entwine my fingers with his. He closes the space between us and cradles the back of my head with his free hand while he kisses me deeply. I moan softly and lean into the kiss. I break away to put my glass down and kiss him properly, but he forestalls me.

"Let's go outside - it's a beautiful night." I shrug and follow him out, grabbing the bottle. I figured that kissing would have been higher on his to-do list, but I'm flexible. On his deck, he turns on some rock music. I don't know if he remembers the night of May 23rd, but it reminds me of how we danced together then. He's a lot more coordinated now, though his dance moves are just as dated. They just make me grin before I join him.

"We danced before, you know," I tell him while dancing in step with him.

"Yeah, you mentioned that the night we spent in the station."

"Did I? Huh. I guess we've both spent nights together we can't remember." He laughs heartily.

"I suppose so. I'm glad we're even in that regard." He wraps his arms around me as I spin in from a twist. "Thank you, for being there for me that night. I don't think I ever actually thanked you for that," he adds. The song switches to a slow-dance, and he wraps me in his arms, pulling me close.

"You don't have to thank me," I tell him softly.

"Still," he says. "Is there anything else I don't know about that night?" he asks me. I think for some time. For a moment, I consider not revealing this information, but I figure he obviously already knows that I wanted him.

"Well. Do you remember that you hit on me?"

"Yeah, you told me that the same night at the station." I nod and swallow.

"Did I tell you what I said afterward?" He thinks for a moment.

"I don't think so?"

"I said, and I think I'm quoting, 'If you still want me when you're sober, I'll be here in a heartbeat.'" He doesn't say anything immediately, so I chuckle nervously. "So, I clearly have been wanting this for some time, in the off chance you didn't know that." He kisses me suddenly, deeply, catching me off guard.

"I'm sorry," he says with some sadness.

"For?"

"I shouldn't have...I was a real jerk. I thought you knew that I felt the same way you did, but since you didn't know that, you must have thought that I had only wanted you when I was drunk." I nod a few times, remembering the sadness and blow to my esteem that impression had caused. He kisses me again, bringing with his lips the return of my good-humor. "I wanted you for so long, Tricia. Practically since I met you. Why do you think I remembered your favorite wine?" he asks with a wink. My breath catches.

"Really?" My heart is soaring. "When - when did you first start liking me?"

"I *wanted* you the first second I saw you. I *liked* you probably that first time we talked. I couldn't stop thinking about you...I spent a lot more time at Big Wig in the past months than I have before you started there," he admits with a grin. I stretch up on to my tip toes to kiss him.

"I wish you had made a move sooner," I tell him softly.

"Me too," he says, kissing the top of my head. "I'm lucky you didn't fall madly in love with Josh Harrington and tell me to buzz off." I burst out laughing.

"Luck had nothing to do with it."

"I know," he says while moving his hands across my curves. "You're a phenomenal woman." I feel a yearning for him deep in my core. His hands cradle my hips. "Do you have any interest in going swimming?" His eyes flash mischievously while he asks.

"I would, but I didn't bring a swimsuit," I say before I realize his intention, and I think my eyes shine with the same light that is in his eyes. "I mean, I would love to."

"Good." He takes the lead, starting to pull off his shirt - leaving no doubt about what he has in mind. Playing a temptress for a few moments, I reach up under my skirt to pull my underwear off first, letting it fall to the ground. He freezes briefly, mouth slightly agape, before redoubling his efforts to undress. I pull my sundress off and finally unhook my bra, let it fall into the pile of my discarded clothing. For Hopper's part, he's completely bare as well. I let myself take in the view, and to my surprise and satisfaction, he's already partially alert. I lick my lips in anticipation before realizing I'm doing it.

"Shall we?" he asks, breaking my study of his form.

"Lead the way," I say. I also want to get a view from behind. I have to stifle a moan. He wades in the water up to his mid thigh before turning to gesture me forward.

"The bottom is a little silty, but once you get used to it, it's nice." I dip a toe in first, testing the temperature. It's a pleasant temperature though a little cold for my tastes, but I slip in. I'm sure I'll be plenty warm soon enough. I have to force myself to get in past my stomach, but then it's quite comfortable, and I kick around, enjoying feeling completely weightless and free. He follows after me, paddling with ease.

"Do you do this often?"

"In the summer, pretty often. Usually I do wear trunks though," he says with a laugh. There's some folks who live down the way that occasionally bring a boat down here."

"Well hopefully no one comes by tonight," I say conspiratorially, brushing one bare leg against his.

"I think we'll be okay," he says while his hand traces from my shoulder to my ass. "In fact, with you here, it'll be much better than just okay." I giggle and flip on to my back, which has the result of

baring my breasts. I hear him grunt with pleasure and desire. He wraps an arm around my waist and swims us back to shallower waters, where he plants his feet and brings my legs so they wrap around his torso. Every so often as I move closer and farther away from the slight waves in the water, I can feel he's no longer just semi-alert. His hands explore my body in the weightlessness, and when his fingers find that sensitive bundle of nerves between my legs, I arch up, enjoying the way the water cradles me as I enjoy his touch.

"Oh, baby," he coos as I climax. As I come down from the height he brought me to, I rise out of the water, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and kissing him fiercely. He moves into deeper water to escape the chill of the air. Our naked bodies are entwined with nothing but the glide of water between them. We kiss passionately, exploring each other and enjoying the sensation of being submersed in the water while we do so. Things rapidly heat up, and there is a burning sense of longing between my legs.

"Hopper, I want more of you," I gasp while I rub against him. He moans.

"Let's go inside." I nod quickly. He sweeps me into his arms and carries me out of the water, bridal style, as the water falls from us first in sheets and then in thick drops. Instead of his bedroom, he carries me to his bathroom, where he turns on the shower.

"Let's wash off the lake first," he explains. I nod and hop into the water, relishing the steam that comes off. I pull him in after me, and then we're kissing again, this time under the showerhead - the water rolling off my back, down his chest. I can get a good look at him now too, instead of just going by moonlight.

I let him slam me into the shower wall, and I lean my head back as he kisses a line down my neck to my breasts. He kisses around one nipple, sucking and nibbling while I tangle my hands in the wet strands of his hair. I pull him up to kiss me again. With the pretense of helping clean him, I lather up my hand with soap and trail it down between us, touching and pleasing him. He moans with abandon, his hands planted on either side of the wall behind me for stability.

I rinse him off in the water, which I suspect brings it's own

pleasurable sensations, and then I sink to my knees, taking him in my mouth while my hands caress his balls.

"Tricia," he moans while one of his hands gently pushes on the back of my head, urging me to take more of him down my throat. I happily oblige. Pleasuring him with the warm water running down my body makes the whole experience more interesting and enjoyable. I hum contentedly while I suck, bobbing up and down on his length, sometimes long and slow, sometimes quick and short, and, when I really want to make him moan, long and fast.

"Oh, stop, stop, stop," he says suddenly. I pull off him, and he helps me from my knees to my feet, bringing me into a kiss. "I didn't want to cum yet. Fuck, Tricia." He pushes me against the wall again to kiss me fiercely, and I tense in surprise at first at the chill of the tile, but then I lean into it and enjoy the sensation while his hands roam all over my body. It's his turn to soap up his hands - to wash and pleasure. As he takes care of me, I lather up as much of his body as I can reach.

Eventually, we're able to make it out of the shower by knowing what ecstasy awaits us when we make it to the bedroom. Hastily drying off, I don't bother donning any clothes, instead just rushing to the bed to wait for him. When he emerges from the bathroom, he is using every ounce of his sexy swagger, and I nearly die in anticipation.

As he reaches the bed, he climbs on top of me while I lean down against the bed so that his body hovers over mine, covering me completely. We kiss, and I wrap one of my legs around one of his, caressing down the length of it. He begins grinding his hips against mine, and the yearning I have felt for so long flares to new strengths. I moan and arc against him.

"Jim," I gasp. I pull away to look into his eyes. "Now. Let's fuck now." His hands grip me tighter as he captures my mouth in a passionate kiss.

"Yes." He reaches over the nightstand for a condom, sitting back as he puts it on. As he turns back, perched above me, he asks, "Are you sure that you-"

"Yes," I exclaim, desperation clear. He grins at me and positions himself between my legs, gazing into my eyes. He eases inside me while I gasp as I stretch to accommodate him. He releases a shuddering moan as each inch slips inside.

"Fuck," he mutters in my neck. "Tricia," he moans while his hips begin to move slowly, driving himself in and out. I moan wordlessly and move with him, my arms wrapped around his torso.

"Jim, I-" I stop myself just in time from telling him I need him. Harder and harder he thrusts, making use of every inch of himself to send me to the ceiling. I can't stop moaning and writhing around him.

"Harder," I gasp, and he complies by pounding away. My legs end up pointed towards the ceiling to allow him even deeper access. He's the only thing I can think of – his skin on mine, his hands holding my waist, then the back of my neck. All I can be – the only parts of me that exist are the ones he's touching. I submit my soul to him; I want to give him everything.

"Turn around," he gasps, and I order my heavy, pleasure-filled limbs to comply. I roll to all fours while he stands behind me, penetrating me from behind.

"Hopper," I gasp the first time he enters. I feel him even deeper than before. I scoot my hips back to push him farther inside. I'm rewarded with a gasp.

"Tricia," he calls with desperation. "You're going to kill me," he groans while throwing himself inside me.

"I hope that's a good thing," I manage to say between moans.

"Yes." His arms wrap around my body, holding me still while his dick plunders me. I gasp with every thrust, and as I lean down to collapse my head on the bed, something inside changes, and I scream.

"You liked that?" he asks with a hint of sadism as he repeats the motion. I scream again and barely gasp out a yes before he's doing it again and again and again, and I'm completely losing my mind.

My hands clutch the sheets for dear life while he sends me to

uncharted heights. My toes curl as my whole body is racked with the pleasure. I manage to register it's okay to scream like this since Hopper's home is so isolated.

"Jim?" I call.

"Yes?"

"Please don't stop. I'm-I'm gonna cum," I choke.

"Cum for me," he whispers in my ear, and then I'm shaking and screaming and slamming one of my hands on the bed while the orgasm of all orgasms tears through me. "Fuck, that was amazing. Fuck," he moans as he thrusts. "I'm going to cum," he cries. I only manage a whimpered moan in response – I'm still dazed from my orgasm.

"Oh, God," he moans on repeat and then buries himself inside me and stays there for a few seconds; I can feel his body trembling ever so slightly against me, and then he collapses beside me, utterly spent. I sigh with pleasure and tuck myself up against him. I'm rewarded with him wrapping one of his strong arms around my back and drawing me closer.

"That was amazing," I say on a sigh. He leans down to kiss me, his hand running across my chest to tease and cradle my breasts.

"That was fucking phenomenal." His voice is the deepest I've heard it - quiet and pleasantly tired and buzzing with post-sex endorphins - and it's the sexiest sound I've ever heard. I end up dozing off in his bed, and I wake up disoriented. It takes me a few seconds to remember where I am and who is in bed with me. When I do remember, all that euphoric contentment returns. I snuggle closer to him, inadvertently causing him to stir.

"Mm, my beautiful Tricia," he mumbles, gathering me closer to him. I giggle and snuggle against him.

"My handsome Jim," I whisper back, caressing his body. We kiss slowly, tenderly, savoring the sensations. He hums contentedly as he pulls back, smiling at me before tucking my hair behind my ears.

"Do you want to spend the night?" he asks. My heart flutters. God do I ever. But a hundred *buts* race through my head - my mother will know for sure we slept together and will disapprove, what if someone sees him drive me home in the morning, what if I fall irrevocably in love with him?

"I want to, but-"

"I understand," he answers before I even pick which reason to voice. He probably understands all of them. "I'll drive you home in a little bit. But I want to kiss you a little longer first." I giggle while he leans in for the kiss. We stay like that - kissing and holding and touching - for more than just a little bit, but I don't mind. When we're starting to get too tired to continue, he gets up with a groan and we recollect our clothes.

The drive back is peaceful in the still night. It takes me a few minutes, but I finally work up the courage to reach over and hold his hand. To my surprise, he smiles over at me and squeezes my hand. We don't talk much on the way back, both of us spent, but it's one of those comfortable, companionable silences where nothing needs to be said.

"I had a great evening, Tricia," he tells me as we approach my house.

"I had a great evening too. Drive home safely," I tell him while I lean over to plant a peck on his cheek. He turns at the last second, stealing a kiss on the lips. I smile into the kiss and press against him more fully. I sigh with happiness as pull away. "I'll see you soon?" I want to leave it as a statement, but it comes out as a question.

"Yes, definitely." After one more kiss, I'm out of excuses to linger, so I hop out and head into my house, waving goodbye before I close the front door.

That night was a fantasy come to life. It made me completely forget all my reservations about Hopper. But I shouldn't have.

22. Two Weeks Later

The first few days that I didn't hear from him, I was too elated from our night together to mind. I figured he was busy or didn't realize it was sort of important for him to give me a call. And I didn't mind - I knew what I signed up for. Realizing I don't have to wait to hear from him, I looked him up in the phone book and gave him a rang. I tried in the morning before he would have gone to work. I tried midday, in case he was sick or on a binger. I tried in the evening. Nothing.

After the first week I didn't hear from him, my friends and family could tell something was wrong. I was jumping every time the phone rang, worrying my bottom lip, and gradually becoming shorter with my loved ones. I racked my brain - trying to think of anything that I did wrong, said wrong to push him away. I turned over every second of the night, but nothing added up. We both clearly had a fantastic time.

And so, I started imagining every possibility as to why I hadn't heard from him - ranging from him being mauled by a bear to falling in love with someone who isn't me. Every possibility is excruciating. I considered showing up at his house - or even the station - just to make sure he's still alive, but then reality set in. It has *only* been a week. And though it feels like an eternity, he and I were (I hate that I've reverted to the past tense) casual. I'm probably overreacting. It's just that night was magical for me. It hurts that apparently I did not have the same impact on him.

After the second week, the fact that he hasn't even come into the bar has me convinced he's decided to end things between us and isn't man enough to face me. So, I decide enough is enough. I've worried about him enough. I've worried about what it was I did wrong enough. I've worried if it's common knowledge that he and I have, apparently, fizzled out. I resolve to put him from my mind...and my heart.

But it's easier said than done, and I even dial his number a few times just to slam the receiver down before the first ring...and I spend more than a few nights silently crying from the loss of him, wishing I had spent the night, wishing I had savored every second with him more.

While at the same time, part of me wishes I had listened to his warnings, had spared myself this heartbreak by staying away from him. I don't understand - I gave him everything and showed him so much of my soul - and he just...dropped off. I understand now, what it was he tried to warn me about.

The inquiring glances of the townspeople are probably the worst part. I know what they're thinking - are we still surreptitiously together? Or did he leave me like he left all the others? At least the lack of pity in their stares means the general consensus is still up in the air. Lucy knows - I tearfully confessed my heartbreak to her in the store room at the end of week two. She held me and reassured me that I didn't need him anyways. My mom suspects - the gloom I've been in the past week is confirmation enough. As is the fact that I haven't gone out these weeks. But, to her credit, she hasn't hit me with a knowing sigh or the dreaded "I told you so."

At week three, I decide the reason for this lingering sadness is the lack of closure. So, on my next day off, I put on my most devastatingly pretty lipstick, a pair of cut-off jeans, a tank top, and wedges. He's going to regret leaving me.

As I pull into the station, I nearly lose my nerve, but I gather a deep breath and my courage, and I saunter into the station.

"Is Hopper here?" I ask the woman at the front while tucking my sunglasses so they hang from my shirt, slightly tugging my top down to bare more cleavage.

"I can see if he's available," she says, stammering a little initially.

"That'd be great, thanks," I say with a sweet smile. As I wait for her to return, I ponder what I should do if he's man enough to face me. Do I yell at him in front of the whole station, or do I do it privately? I turn at the sound of footsteps approaching, and I see Hopper for the first time since we made love. He stops in his tracks when we make eye contact.

"Tricia," he breathes.

"Hopper," I reply evenly. He seems to realize the significance of my

arrival, and his eyes flick around the room, no doubt noting the many silent witnesses observing this scene.

"Do you want to come to my office?" The uncertainty in his affect tells me he's not sure if I came here with the intention of yelling at him publically.

"That would be good," I answer. The thumping of my heart at the sight of him won't let me humiliate him. Silently he leads me back.

"What the hell, Hopper," I start as soon as he shuts the door.

"I know, I'm sorry," he tries to interject.

"I don't understand you. I thought what we had was - nevermind, clearly I was wrong. But surely you knew how I felt, why would you just leave me hanging? Why? You weren't man enough to face me and tell me that your feelings had changed? Tell me like a man and do me the courtesy of a conversation?"

"Tricia," he interrupts me, grabbing my shoulders. I try to push him off, but he holds firm. "I'm sorry that I didn't contact you since our date. I didn't mean to give you the impression that I didn't want to be with you anymore. My feelings for you have not changed - not one bit." The sincerity in his voice makes my heart skip a beat.

"What?" I ask, stilling my attempts to push him away.

"I like you, I really, really do. And I'm sorry I feel out of contact." The block of my ice thick around my heart begins to thaw. He pulls back, running a hand through his hair. "I went off the deep end for a little, and I didn't want you to see me like that or have to deal with me."

"Jim, I've seen you like that, I mean, for god's sake, I-"

"It wasn't like that," he interjects. "I was surly, and angry, and mean. And yes, I was drinking a lot. I was a mess in that regards. But I was off my medication too," he says softly. I take a step towards him, extending a hand to rest on his arm.

"Jim, why?" He and I haven't talked about that aspect of his mental and emotional health much, and he's clearly self-conscious about it.

He shrugs, seeming to shake off a layer of emotion and replace it with a steely facade. "Jim?" I press, stepping closer.

"I heard a back to school commercial," he says so softly I strain to make out the words.

"Oh," I say softly. I look Jim, and I realize I have been too harsh on him. I knew this sort of thing was a risk when I agreed to that first date, and I could have made more of an effort to reach out - I should have, clearly. He needed a friend, and I was too self-conscious and doubtful to realize that he wasn't just pushing me away. I step closer, wrapping my arms around him. He stiffens at first, but I just hug tighter, and he relaxes in my arms, holding me too.

"Jim, when these things happen, I want you to tell me. Unless you tell me you don't want me to, I'm here to stay," I tell his chest. He doesn't respond for a while, so I pull away to look at him. "Understand?" I ask him, making him look into my eyes.

"Yes," he says, his voice breaking. "Thank you." I tut.

"You don't need to-"

"I know. But thank you all the same. Thank you for wanting to be there. And thank you for giving me another chance. I know that I should have reached out. During. And after. I just wanted to put off telling you; I didn't want to admit what feels like weakness, and I knew you'd be concerned about me."

"I *was* concerned," I interrupt. "I was worried something terrible had happened to you and you were in the hospital or something!" I exclaim, realizing only after the words are out that perhaps I revealed too much. But he doesn't seem concerned by the depth of my feelings, just touched.

"I'm sorry, I should have realized you'd be worried." He pulls me into another hug, and I let myself enjoy his touch, leaning into him and nuzzling against his chest. I didn't think I'd get to do this again. The ice that was once so thick over my emotions is down to a thin layer, threatening to break at any moment.

"I forgive you," I tell him, surprising even myself. "But I am still hurt. I felt so vulnerable, since we had slept together, and I thought that you didn't...want me anymore." I admit.

"I'm so sorry. I promise you, that's not what happened. I haven't stopped wanting you, haven't stopped thinking about you since that night." One of his hands strokes the back of my head, caressing the back of my neck. "I understand that it will take time for you to trust me again. And I don't want to rush you. I should have reached out sooner, I should have told you..." I shrug.

"Yeah," I say softly, all the emotions of the past weeks bubbling up in my voice, causing it to break. He tugs me tighter - I feel warm and cared for in his arms, and the sudden contrast with my emotions about him only a few minutes ago causes a few tears to leak out. One of his hands traces down my spine.

"I got back on my meds so that I could see you again," he says softly.

"Really?" I ask, looking up at him and choking back a sob.

"Really," he says, holding me close. I bury my head in his chest and hold him while he talks. "I managed to get back to work, but I was so irritable and angry with people, I knew I couldn't see you while I was like that. I couldn't risk being so short with you or saying something hurtful. So I made myself start taking them again."

"I'm glad you're feeling better. But next time, call me. Please," I tell him, looking deep into his eyes to make sure he understands.

"Alright."

"I want to be there - for the good times *and* the hard times." He swallows hard and smiles.

"Thank you," he says softly.

"It's good to see you again," I say, changing the subject.

"It's good to see you, too. And, can I just say, Tricia, you look stunning." I dip my head, feeling a flush on my cheeks. When I look him in the eyes again, he's fixed me with that sheepishly charming

grin. I sigh and shake my head with a smile. Damn, he could play me like a fiddle if he wanted to.

"You can say," I answer with a hint of reservation in my voice, "but no touching." He hums sadly at that.

"I suppose I can't argue with that. Though that is a very cruel punishment."

"Not more than you deserve," I retort. He holds his hands up in surrender.

"No, you're right. A kiss?" he asks, leaning forward slightly. I roll my eyes.

"Fine, one kiss." He smiles and plants a gentle kiss on my lips. And I fully intended for that to be it. But the touch sends sparks through me, and I moan softly, pushing back against him, my hands automatically going to his collar to tug him down against me. His hands tentatively find my waist, holding me against him. I go up to my tip-toes and drape my arms around his neck while I deepen the kiss. Now it's his turn to moan, and he tightens his grip on my waist, one of his hands sneaking lower to press against my lower back.

The thought of wrapping my legs around him and having him pin me up against the back wall and drive into me until I'm screaming - the rest of the station be damned - does flash through my head. He'd feel so good inside me - how I've missed his hands and his cock tormenting and pleasuring me. He could do it too, wouldn't even need to take those temptingly tight pants off - he could just fuck me through the fly. And I'd let him, even though anyone could walk by and see us - see me letting him ravish me. And I bet he'd do it, too. With a gasp, I break the kiss.

"I should go," I say breathlessly, forcing the words out before any other suggestions can come out. He steps back, ducking his head.

"Yeah," he says softly. When he meets my gaze again, the heat from moments before is only simmering.

"I'm glad we could talk," I say simply.

"Me too. And again, I'm sorry."

"I know," I say warmly. "I'm just going to need some time to wrap my head around the fact that we're still together. And some time to heal from-"

"I know," he says so I don't have to say the painful phrase "not hearing from you after we fucked." I nod and head for the door. "Hey," he calls, and I turn back around. "It won't happen again. I promise." He's so sincere, how could I not believe him? I nod once in acknowledgement. "I'll call you. Let's set another date."

"I'd like that," I tell him. "Have a good day," I say simply in parting. As I leave the station, I can feel the curious stares that follow me out the door. Once in my car, I sigh thoughtfully. Well, that didn't go how I thought it would - not in the slightest. Going in thinking I was going to curse out an ex and coming out with a date planned is a considerable improvement, but though the ice around my heart is gone, there are barriers that weren't there before - barbed wire fences and street barricades - that Hopper will have to successfully navigate before we're back to the place we were three weeks ago. That's probably for the best, I think to myself.

The ease with which I forgave him is somewhat alarming to me. A few well-placed touches, kind words, and a hardship is all it takes? Even without considering everything else - like how my happiness depended so heavily upon hearing from him and how easily he could get me back in his bed if he asked - that indicates I need to tap the brakes on this emotionally. Or I'm asking to be hurt. I don't know how serious he is about us - though that conversation did indicate he feels similarly - and I don't want to end up wanting to be more committed than he is. Depending on how the next date goes, maybe it's time to bring that up - see if this is just having fun to him, or if he's thinking more long term. Maybe the next date would be too soon...but I don't know how long I'll be able to hold off falling for him completely.

23. Commitment

Hopper's POV

I should be working on typing up this report about the garden gnomes going missing from Phil Larsen's garden, but every time I try to focus, my thoughts return to my latest date with Tricia. As promised, I had called her up for another date. I know I needed to make up a lot to her, so I took her to the nicest restaurant I know, an Italian place that is conveniently also a few towns over. I know she's still wary, so I didn't want to pressure her into staying with me or cause strain on our relationship from starting the gossip flying again - and if we had been seen out at a fancy restaurant, damn would it fly.

She looked amazing in her little black dress that was tight enough to offer a suggestion of her curves without revealing just how marvelous her figure is. I was still the envy of every man in the restaurant though, and I could hardly believe my luck, seeing her smiling and laughing across the table. We closed the place, talking and laughing, and I could see her confidence in our relationship returning. *Relationship*, I think the word with a newfound glow of happiness.

When it was time to leave, I offered to drive her home to make it clear I had no expectation of resuming the physical aspect of our relationship. She accepted my offer, though I could tell she was torn whether to propose a detour to my place. On the way back, she suddenly asked me to pull over, and I did so without asking questions. I realized we were stopped beside a park - now empty of people and cars - and she crawled into the backseat with a mischievous glance.

"Are you coming?" she asked me in the most tempting voice. How could I say no? The next few minutes were a frenzy of pent-up sexual release for both of us as we kissed and squeezed and grinded against each other.

"Why don't we just go back to my place?" I had asked without thinking while laying a string of kisses around her neck. I felt her freeze in my arms and knew I had misstepped.

"Because if we go back to your place, we'll have sex. And I'm not ready to do that again yet."

"Tricia, that's totally fine. I would never pressure you. I just thought we would be more comfortable-" she held up a hand to stop me, laying a delicate finger on my lips.

"I know you wouldn't. But if I was alone with you - properly alone - I wouldn't be able to stop myself from giving my body over to you completely." She didn't mean for what she said to be sexy - at least I don't think she did - but God did it get my heart racing. I unintentionally gripped her thighs a little tighter at the thought of having her beneath me, her body yielding to me completely, like it did that first time.

"Okay, I understand," I managed to choke out through the haze of my desire. She blessed me with one of her tender smiles then, and kissed me gently. Just thinking of her straddling me in the backseat, her hands on my chest and her lips on mine, gets my pulse racing.

"Thank you for understanding. It's hard enough for me to not try to fuck you here." I had to swallow a groan. God, she was killing me. "I wish it was easier for me to resist you," she confessed, running her fingers from the sides of my face down to my chest.

"What do you mean?" I asked, shifting her slightly to one side of me so we had more room to talk. She sighed, clearly uncertain about what to say next.

"I told myself I wouldn't sleep with you again until we had addressed where we are feeling about each other. In terms of commitment. And I wasn't sure if it was too early to bring up, but we have known each other a while before this, and I didn't want to get hurt again if I was somewhere you weren't and I didn't realize you weren't there." I grabbed both her hands with mine then.

"I think you're right we should talk about it. As I've said, I really like you. And Tricia, I've been thinking about where we are, and where we're going. I want this to be something serious." Her expression lit up at that.

"Serious in terms of...?"

"I want to be with you long-term," I told her, and she leaned in to kiss me fiercely. I had to break away to finish my statement though. "Even with that in mind though, I'm not sure I'm ready to apply a label. Like of boyfriend/girlfriend." She frowned thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure I understand. Does that mean you don't want to be exclusive?"

"No, no, no, that's not what I mean. I absolutely want to only be with you. Maybe my reservations are silly...but, being boyfriend-girlfriend, it's a big commitment, and it's a big label. To me, especially. Since my divorce, I've only had one 'girlfriend,' and it didn't end well. Granted, I'm more...stable now, and you," I paused as I wrapped my arms around her and appreciated everything Tricia is to me. "You make me feel so...steady. I think I can be steady for you - but I don't want to move too fast, in case I'm wrong. Being your boyfriend will come with added responsibilities, and I'm just not sure I'm ready for those yet." She nodded a few times, though I could tell that overall, I hadn't given her the answer she might have been hoping for.

"I understand. I agree there's benefit to taking it slow."

"I'm glad we're on the same page. Is that...okay with you?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she answered sincerely. "I'm...thinking long-term too, and I am glad we are both see a future that involves the other." I nodded enthusiastically at that.

"Yes, totally. And," I added, "if that changes, and you want a label, let me know. It's not that I'm strictly opposed, it's just not what I think is best at this time. And I'll let you know when that changes on my end."

"Sounds like a plan," she said with a kiss. I dropped her off shortly after, and I've been second-guessing my hesitation to be boyfriend/girlfriend since then. She seemed fine with that resolution, and I'm relieved to have it confirmed that we are indeed both thinking long-term. But it just seems silly to hold back on the label. Between now and whatever point down the line that I decide I'm comfortable with

the label - what could possibly happen to change how I feel about her?

Every time I've seen her I've only liked her more, wanted to be her one and only more. Yes, I'm not thrilled about the idea of doing the obligatory boyfriend things, like flowers and cards at Valentine's Day or family dinners, but for Tricia - to spend more time with her and to make her happy - I'd do it.

The last reason I want to hold out is that as soon as we apply a label, word will spread. Sure, at first it will just be our families and close friends. But at some point, the guys at the station will refer to her, or someone at the bar will ask how we're doing - the point is, it will spread. And everyone will be ridiculously interested. If we apply the label only to break up soon after, it would be embarrassing, mostly for her. But, I remind myself, that is a risk at any time. And there's nothing that could come up to change my feelings - I already know so much about her. But, I realize, the reverse may not be true. Before making things official, I need to be more open with her. She knows about the worst of the skeletons in my closet, but she deserves to know more of me if we're going to be committed to each other.

Any reservations about being tied down are nonexistent - those meaningless one-night stands are nothing compared to getting to see her smile. My spirit lightens just at the thought of her, standing in her doorway two nights ago, smiling and waving as she saw me pull up before bounding down the walkway.

A commotion in the main room interrupts my pleasant thoughts, and I head out to see what's going on.

"I want to speak with Chief Hopper," I hear a woman yelling.

"How can I help you?" I ask with an edge of impatience in my voice as I enter the room. The woman turns around, looking so enraged I'm surprised smoke isn't coming out of her ears. It takes me a few seconds, but I recognize the woman who turns around as Tricia's mother. "Ms. Williams," I say, assuming my most conciliatory tone. After all, I did just decide I want to take things to the next level with Tricia. "It's good to see you again." She stalks closer to me, wordlessly. "We met once before, when I-"

"I remember," she interrupts, her tone clipped. "You showed up at my house uninvited to speak with my daughter."

"Yes," I say with a smile that seems to have no impact. "Is there something you would like to discuss?"

"Yes. What exactly are your intentions with my daughter?" It takes me a second to process her meaning and compose a response.

"My intentions? As in, where I see this relationship going?"

"A relationship? See, I thought you were just trying to use her for sex." I suck on my teeth and swallow my annoyance in order to remain cordial.

"Would you like to have this conversation in my office, ma'am?" I offer, gesturing to the hallway away from the pen of watching officers.

"No. I'd like to have it here. And I'm not much older than you, so I'd watch it with those 'ma'am's."

"My apologies," I say because I can think of nothing else to say. "My intention is not at all to take advantage of Tricia. I like her very much."

"Really!" she exclaims. "You expect me to believe that? After you toyed with her emotions for weeks? She was miserable because you couldn't be bothered to pick up the phone. Or you didn't care enough about her to do so." Her words hit me harder than I thought they would, reminding me that I hurt Tricia with my carelessness and instability. I make placating gestures, trying to calm her down. "I know what type of man you are, Jim Hopper. You may have fooled my daughter, taken advantage of her naivete, but you won't fool me."

"Ms. Williams, I assure you, I didn't mean to hurt Tricia. I have every intention of continuing a committed relationship with her. She and I talked just a couple days ago," I say quietly to limit the spread of this information, "and we are in similar places, emotionally. We are in this for the long term, and I don't anticipate things ending anytime soon, so you might as well get used to it," I say before I can stop

myself.

"So, what? You'd marry her?" I sputter, taken aback by the question.

"I mean, I don't think we've gotten there yet, but the way things are going-"

"You expect me to believe that the local playboy wants to settle down with a woman ten years his junior? I may not hold the same authority to you as her father would, but you better watch yourself - I won't stand for my daughter to be toyed with by the likes of you." With that, she turns and storms out of the station. It takes me a few seconds to recover from all that.

"I'd prefer if knowledge of that conversation didn't leave this room," I call to the officers now frantically trying to appear busy. I head to my office, but I never make it back. I need to talk to Tricia.

Tricia's POV

"Hey," Hopper says as he strides up to the bar. Today it's busy already, and I'm shocked that he's openly addressing me. "Do you have a break anytime soon?" he asks. I fight the urge to look around and double check he's talking to me. I glance over at Lucy.

"You can take five - I'll be able to hold down the fort." I nod my thanks. "Just don't take longer than that, you two," she adds with a teasing wink. I fight the urge to throw the towel I was using at her. A couple people at the bar chuckle, but I just roll my eyes and head out.

"What's up?" I ask the second we're outside. He doesn't seem too stressed, but his sudden arrival here is sending up alarm bells.

"I know you said that you and your mother are very different, but I think you're more alike than you realize," he says. I look at him, concerned. What does that mean? "She came to the station today and asked me about my 'intentions'." My shock and horror shows plainly.

"Was she..."

"Aggressive, yes," he somehow reads my mind. "And vocal. Very

vocal. And she didn't do me the courtesy of a private conversation," he adds. I bury my head in my hands.

"Oh, god, I'm so sorry. That must have been such a spectacle." He shrugs.

"I have more experience with this sort of thing than you may realize," he says deprecatingly.

"Experience with the parents of your lover yelling at you publically?" I ask with raised eyebrows. He laughs.

"No, I guess not that *exactly*. But irate women, yes. And parents - when I've arrested their little angel for breaking the law." I laugh, imagining the scene. "I told her that we were both thinking long-term," he declares suddenly, catching me off guard. "And that I really like you." His deep blue eyes and his words capture all my attention - sure, it's not anything different than had said a few nights ago, but the public declaration means a lot. I have to remind myself to breathe a few seconds later.

"You said that?"

"Yeah. Didn't seem to make much of a difference though," he says with chuckle at something I don't totally understand. "She doesn't have the best impression of me, it seems. And I'm not sure that conversation helped." I sigh. I figured this would be a problem.

"Well, she'll have to get used to the idea of us." He gives me a smile at that and a nod. Despite the few couples walking down the street, the urge to kiss him is overwhelming, and I reach up and leave a gentle peck on his lips. He looks at me, a little stunned, but smiles all the same.

"And, Tricia, I've been thinking a lot about our conversation." He grabs one of my hands then, bringing it up to his lips to lay a gentle kiss. "I want to be more serious with you. And I think I'm ready for a label." My heart starts pounding, and my mouth is fighting a stupidly big grin. "But let's go on one more date first, okay?" I'm a little confused by his suggestion of waiting one more date as he's not one for arbitrary milestones

"I would like that." The slow smile that spreads across his face tells me his happiness is completely genuine. "What is it you have planned for that date?"

"I was hoping I could have you and your mother over for dinner?" My eyebrows shoot up.

"Why?" I ask with some hesitation. He shrugs, and when he answers, he bashfully avoids my gaze.

"I don't want to make it official just to have it fall apart due to conflict with your family. And I don't want to make it official before at least trying to show your mom she can be supportive. That I'm in this for the long-run." My heart is floating.

"That's a great idea. I'll pass along your invitation. I'm sure she'll be thrilled." He gives me a doubtful smile.

"Thank you. I'll see you later," he says, squeezing my hand in goodbye.

24. Easier Said Than Done

"So, you saw Hopper today?" I ask as calmly as I am able as my mom walks in the door.

"Yes, what of it?" She asks in a clipped tone.

"Mom," I chide her. "Why?"

"Because," she says, punctuating the word by tossing her bag down, "he is a bad man." I meant to have this conversation calmly, but now I'm on my feet.

"He is not! He's been nothing but respectful and kind." She scoffs.

"Maybe to you."

"What do you mean?" I ask, intrigued despite myself. She shakes her head.

"He's lazy! He's a drunk! Do you know how many women that man has slept with and not called back?" I'm relieved – I thought she had heard of a skeleton in his closet I didn't.

"No, I ☐ don't know the number. But I knew he did that. People do that all the time."

"Not the person my daughter should be dating!" This is coming from a place of love, I have to remind myself.

"Mom, I love you. You know that. And I know you love me. But you also have to trust me. We talked about this - I want to make my own decisions. I need to. You can think I'm making the wrong ones, but you have to let me make them for myself."

"I know, I know. But that's easier said than done. But that's why I talked to him instead of you. I didn't want to fight again, sweetie."

"Then don't publicly confront and yell at my boyfriend," I tell her with an understanding smile. She sighs.

"Alright, I'm sorry. Wait - your boyfriend?" I think I sense a note of happiness buried beneath the surprise and concern in her voice.

"Yes, my boyfriend. I had talked about where we were two nights ago. We had left it sort of nebulous. But it sounds like he had been revisiting the conversation a lot. And he wants to make it official soon."

"Oh, honey." I can tell she's happy despite herself. "I know how much you have grown to like him, so I am happy that you must be happy." I nod, not totally trusting myself to speak. I'm so glad she isn't mad and instead is willing to put aside her own feelings on the matter and just be happy for me.

"Do you think it's time you met the man behind the rumors? And judged him for yourself instead of based off what other people say?" She's quiet for a few seconds before nodding.

"You're right. Perhaps I've judged him unfairly."

"He offered to have us over for dinner," I tell her, glad I can ingratiate him more to her.

"Tell him under no circumstances - he'll be coming here. I owe him that after the abuse I subjected him to this morning." I stand and hug her.

"Thank you for understanding," I tell her as we embrace.

"Thank you for making me." I head to the living room to watch some tv before bed, but she calls out. "Are you going to tell your father about Hopper?" Her voice is tight like it always is when we talk about him. Shit - I hadn't thought of that.

"I...I guess I will. Next time I see him." My dad isn't the biggest fan of me dating in general. I have no idea how he'll react to me dating an older man with so much baggage. Better wait to tell him until things are more serious.

A week later, I'm anxiously awaiting Hopper's arrival. We've finally found a time in our schedule's clear to meet up, and although I called him last night to confirm we were still on for tonight, I can't

shake this feeling of dread that he'll flake out - forget, pass out in front of the tv, show up wasted...the long and short of it is that I clearly need more time for Hopper to prove that he'll be reliable when it comes to things that matter. I try not to let my anxiety show to my mom, but it's all I can do to stop myself from pacing.

When the doorbell rings and I greet Hopper, who's wearing a button-down and khakis, I didn't realize how much weight I was carrying. It's not just relief at seeing him follow through - I am just so damn happy to see him again. I greet him with a quick peck on the lips, and I squeeze his hand encouragingly before introducing myself to my mom, who is putting the finishing touches on dinner.

"Mom, I think it's time you and Jim we're officially introduced. Mom, meet Jim."

"How do you do, Ms. Williams?" he steps forward, shaking her hand. She returns the gesture, but she's a little cold in her expression.

"I'm looking forward to getting to know you better, Jim."

"Likewise." He's utilizing his charms, and seeing him so smiling and warm makes me crave him. "Can we help you set the table?" he offers, taking the advice I had offered last night. I give him a quick nod of approval.

"That would be wonderful, thank you." I can see her warming up to him already. Together, he and I lay out settings and fill the glasses with water.

"So, Jim," I say while helping my mother bring the casserole to the table, "did you know that I got my taste in music from my mother?" This is one of a number of conversation starters I have memorized in the week since the idea of dinner was initially brought up.

"Really? I wouldn't have taken you for a rock and roll fan, Ms. Williams," he says with a smile.

"Oh, I had my wild teenage years, much as I like to pretend for Tricia's sake I didn't." I grin at that - she's always so worried about setting a good example for me. "And you can call me Emily," she tells

him. Now I really know she's warmed up to him.

All in all, dinner goes surprisingly well. We talk music, the food, sports, tentatively around politics, a little about Indianapolis - though that's a painful topic for both my mother and Hopper, and about the property line battle going on between two houses in the neighborhood. All, things are going well.

Hopper's POV:

"Do the police ever get involved in something like that?" Emily asks me, referring to the property dispute. .

"Every now and then, if things get nasty. Usually it's only if one party starts making noise complaints or something to harangue the other person. And in that case, it's usually the complainer who gets in trouble." Dinner has gone well, and we are now just wrapping up dessert. I notice there is no wine or beer at the table, and neither woman offered either. I'm sure it's a calculated move on both their parts - Tricia because she wants me on my best behavior, and Emily because she no doubt disapproves of my drinking - but after a night of being on tenterhooks, I could use a drink.

"What interested you in being a police officer?" Emily asks. I shift uncomfortably in my chair. Normally, I would trot out my typical lie - about liking the action and public service, which makes most people laugh - but I don't want to lie. And although I also don't want to discuss this with Emily, who is practically a stranger, I do want to tell Tricia. So I clear my throat, and I direct my answer to Tricia, imagining she and I are alone.

"That's sort of a long story." I want to end there, but Tricia looking at me encouragingly helps me press on. *For Tricia*, I remind myself. "I am a vet - of Vietnam," I clarify unnecessarily. I sense, more than hear, Tricia's intake of breath in sympathy, no doubt. "When I came back, after having traveled so far, I couldn't bare to stay in Hawkins. But I was young - I didn't have many professional skills or training, outside of the military. So cop seemed like a good option. And, after the military, I found that I enjoyed the protocol, the training, the hierarchy - it was familiar." Tricia nods in understanding. And she

reaches across the table for my hand. No doubt, she understands this isn't easy for me to talk about.

"Well," Emily says, interrupting Tricia and I from gazing at each other, "it seems like you settled in the right career."

"I think so," I answer, looking at her once more.

"I keep hoping that Tricia will find her path like that - have things just click into place."

"Mom," Tricia says, sounding a little tired. I'm guessing this is a familiar conversation. "I like my job. And the only college I want to go to is art school." Her mom sighs.

"I know, but that's not a career. I keep telling her that she ought to find a steadier career path - one that pays a living wage." Emily directs this comment at me. To kiss up to her mom, I should probably agree, but I can't bring myself to chide Tricia like she's a child.

"There's a lot to be said for following one's dream - there's plenty of people in this town who could attest to that. They struck out trying to do what they loved, so they came back to what was easier and familiar. And I know most of them regret it. There's a select few people who can persevere even when things are difficult, take the path less traveled. Tricia is undoubtedly one of those people. From what I've seen, those are the most successful people - especially when measured in happiness." The glow coming from Tricia's expression is worth every ounce of favor I may have cost myself with her mother. "In my opinion, at least. For what it's worth," I add, softening the statement, and risking a glance at Emily, but she looks nearly as happy as her daughter.

"I suppose you're right. Tricia is very special. I'm glad you see that, Jim." I nod, and an unspoken understanding passes between us: it seems she finally has come to trust I intend to treat her daughter with the respect she deserves.

"You guys, I'm gonna get emotional," Tricia teases, breaking the moment of silent communication. The rest of dinner is less charged as we talk about Emily's job, and I share some of the juiciest past gossip

about her coworkers, and that seems to secure her good opinion. I think she appreciates being caught up on the knowledge all the other locals have.

After dinner, Tricia offers for me and herself to clean up the kitchen. Her mother, seeming to take the hint, graciously accepts and makes herself scarce with the excuse of heading to bed. Once we're alone, Tricia rises on her tip toes and kisses me fiercely.

"You were fantastic," she says, beaming as she breaks apart for air. "You *are* fantastic," she adds, looking up at me bashfully.

"Thank you. I'm glad I seemed to pass the test."

"Me too," she says on a sigh, and I realize how stressed she was about this, and I'm even more glad it went well. I pull her into a hug, running my hands over her back to help release the tension she'd been holding. "So," she says slyly, "does this mean we're boyfriend and girlfriend now?" I freeze unintentionally, thinking of what's ahead.

"I'd like to be. Why don't we clean up the kitchen and then head somewhere quiet to talk?" She nods, looking slightly confused but not asking any questions. When the leftovers are put away and the dishes washed, she goes to her mom's room briefly to tell her she's heading out for a bit, and we go to my truck.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asks, a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

"Anything you want to." I glance over at her, taking my eyes from the road momentarily. "I know I haven't exactly been an open book, and I realize I know a lot more about you than you know about me...I figured we should lessen that differential before becoming official, on the off-chance that something comes up that is a deal-breaker for you."

"That's so sweet, Jim." I've noticed she uses my first name when she's feeling especially close to me, so that tells me how touched she is by my offer to open up. I pull to the side of the road near the park where we had the first big Talk of our relationship.

"So," I say, killing the engine. "Ask me anything." She nods thoughtfully, silent for some time.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you were a veteran?" I shrug, not really wanting to talk about it, but she fixes me with a disapproving glare.

"Sorry, right, I'm supposed to be answering your questions." I sigh. This was easier said than done. "It never came up, and I don't like to talk about it. It was a pretty horrible experience. I was lucky to come out of it relatively unscathed. A lot of the guys I went over with came back - if they came back at all - with missing limbs or...missing parts of themselves, mentally - nightmares, terrors, flashbacks." She nods in understanding.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked-"

"No," I cut her off. "You should. Ask me something else." She fiddles with a button on her shorts.

"Did you kill anyone?"

"Yes, more than a couple. I had an active-duty shooting in the city, too." Her eyes flash to meet mine, concern in them. She reaches out to touch my arm.

"Oh. I'm so glad you're okay," she breathes. I think for the first time, she realizes the danger of my job. "I'm glad you work in Hawkins," she blurts, looking like she regrets it after. I reach out to reassure her.

"I'm glad too. But anything can happen at anytime - there's no guarantees in life." She nods, absorbing my words.

"What happened - in the shooting?" I sigh. She's really asking all the tough questions, I think with appreciation at her determination and forthrightness.

"I was on patrol, and I happened across a drug-deal. There were three against me and my partner. The dealers shot their customer - no doubt to get rid of the witness - and fired at the squad car. My partner and I tried to just disarm them, but it was going to be us or them, and the shots ended up being lethal."

"Thank you for telling me." She pauses. "Can we go someplace we can be closer? I want to be touching you." Her voice is quiet, timid.

"Yes," I start the car. It's getting late, but I'll just take her to my place. We should be cuddled up for this. And I want her in my arms so badly. She avoids asking me any seriously pointed questions on the drive over, sticking to more mundane things, like if I would consider being a vegetarian and how old I was when I had my first drink. She does drop a few zingers though - like how many people I've slept with, my thoughts on abortion, if I liked her mother. The fact that I'm driving makes it harder for me to gauge her reactions to my answers, but she doesn't ask me to take her back home, so I can't be doing too badly.

When we walk through the door, we wordlessly head to my bed and intertwine our bodies, legs tangled and our hands clasped together.

"Do you still talk to your ex-wife?" I suck in a breath at that.

"Rarely. She...she's moved on with her life. And I try to stay out of her way in doing that. She just thinks of me as her drunkard ex." She hums sadly, like she does whenever she asks a question that has an answer she thinks must be painful for me.

"Have you ever tried to stop drinking?"

"Yes," I answer, this one actually making me sad. "A couple times. The side effects...and I can never hold out for long, which just makes me feel worse," I admit.

"Have you ever tried to quit smoking?" I laugh, surprising her.

"You want me to give up all my vices, little lady?" I tease her.

"Not *all* of them...maybe just do them less?" she admits. "But, look, your body, your choice. I just want to get a gauge on how you view those vices."

"I'd like to quit. In theory. But, that's a lot of work. And it feels good. And I've been doing it for so long...it just seems silly. Can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"You're not *that* old," she says with a smile. "And you handled dinner pretty well tonight, so maybe you're not giving your adaptability enough credit."

"You're going to turn me into some preppy little nice boy, aren't you?"

"I'd never," she replies, in a mock-scandalized tone. "I like your edges rough." Her hands find my collar, and her voice is sultry. My hands grip her waist, pulling her body against mine.

"Good," I tell her, my hands slipping to grab her ass. She giggles and kisses me deeply, causing me to moan. When we finally break apart, I let her resume her questioning. "Now, I know you've got more you want to ask me."

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"I don't want to hurt you," she says so quietly I have to strain to hear her.

"I can handle it," I say, but my jaw is clenched, bracing for what may come next. She takes a deep breath.

"Have you considered...would you want...would you want to have another kid?" she finally asks in a rush. I feel like I was punched in the gut, and it does take me a few seconds to compose myself so that she doesn't know how hard it is for me to contemplate that. It was fair of her to ask, but it's not easy for me to answer.

"I don't know," I answer, cutting off the apology she began to stammer. "I haven't been in a serious enough relationship since then to warrant considering it." I swallow hard. "But I do miss having a kid in my life. I...like kids," she raises her eye brows at me. "Don't look so surprised," I tease, and she laughs.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to...I shouldn't be so surprised. But you're very...aloof," she says after a pause. I shrug, shifting her in my arms.

"I know. It's fair to be surprised. But I like their energy, their enthusiasm - being able to teach them things."

"Thank you for answering me. Would you be...would it be a dealbreaker if your partner didn't want to have kids?" she asks quietly.

"No," I answer automatically. "It wouldn't be." Not with Tricia at least - she could set half the town on fire, and I'd still want to be with her. She nuzzles against me then, and we kiss for some time before we're in the mood to talk again. And talk we do. The rest of her questions are mercifully lower stakes - she takes the opportunity to learn more about me, asking about things like who I consider my best friend, what it was I first liked about her, my favorite TV show, how often I see my family - the things normal people talk about. She yawns deeply, sinking into the bed and seemingly out of questions. I plant a kiss on her cheek.

"Do you want to spend the night?" my voice sounds surprisingly vulnerable to my ears.

"I do," she whines, "but I have to work late tomorrow. I should get a good night's rest." I nod. "Maybe next time," she says, trailing her hand down my chest.

"I'd like that," I say, capturing her hand in mine.

"I'm sorry I grilled you so hard tonight," she says on the ride back. I laugh, startling her.

"I admit, it was a bit more rigorous than I thought you'd be." She grins at me sheepishly. "I should have known better though - you're not one to let something you want go."

"You're right. And I really want to get to know you."

"I think you know me pretty damn well after all that," I tease, making her laugh again. I love that sound, I think while glancing over at her. "So, are we boyfriend and girlfriend?" She looks at me, wide-eyed in her excitement.

"I'd like to be."

"Really? Still? My best friend owning a burger joint didn't scare you off, my vegetarian?" I'm rewarded with another burst of laughter.

"Not in the slightest. It's going to take a *lot* more than that to get rid of me, Jim Hopper." She leans close to me, speaking low.

"Good. I can't have my girlfriend running off at the first sign of trouble." She beams at me.

"Never." The warmth in her gaze and voice makes my heart pick up.

"But let's hold off on any more family dinners for a while."

"Agreed," she says with emphasis and departs after a heated kiss. I think about her the whole drive home. God, I'm falling for her so fast.

A/N: As always, I hope you liked the latest chapter! It's been remarkably smooth sailing so far...I wouldn't count on that to continue... :). I appreciate every review!

25. Green Eyed Monster

A/N: Sorry for the delay - hope you all like the chapter!

Green-Eyed Monster

True to Hopper's prediction, word about he and I being official seems to fly around the town. Lord knows how - we told maybe 5 people collectively, but *c'est la vie*. I don't mind, not at first, at least. I like people knowing that Hopper is serious about me and that I'm serious about him. The downside is that now people seem like they think they can talk about this with me. Most of the regular clientele knows better, but there are a few who press me for details every time they come in. I usually shrug off the attention and evade their questions, and but it's getting on my nerves.

The one upside is that with Jim and I officially together, there isn't much cause for us to stay away from each other in public. So, when Jim comes into the bar with a friend for a mid-afternoon game of pool, I slide away from the bar for a minute to plant a quick kiss on his lips.

"Hey there, handsome," I tell him while pulling away. He wraps one of his arms around me as we walk to the pool table.

"Hey there, gorgeous," he replies with a grin.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" I ask him and his friend.

"Heineken for me," his friend says.

"I'll take a Stella," Hopper answers. I've noticed he's been shying away from hard liquor, at least in the day, and it makes me smile. I've barely even hinted that his heavy drinking concerns me, but he's either picked up on it or assumes, and has been reducing his intake. Which means more to me than I think he realizes. As much as I loathe to leave Hopper's presence, I need to attend the other customers as well, so once I bring them their orders, I return to the bar.

It's a relatively slow day, so I get a multitude of opportunities to admire Hopper's form as he plays. Every now and then, he'll catch me looking from across the room, and our eyes will meet in a heated gaze. I always look away first, blushing. He makes very scandalous thoughts run through my head. Especially when he fixes me with that stupid grin of his. Even now, as I wiping down the bar, I can't help but smile to myself at the thought of him. I shake my head - I've fallen so damn hard. But how could I not?

These past three weeks, things have been phenomenal between us. We've seen each other a few times each week - making dinner together, grabbing a few drinks, or going to the movies, just regular couple stuff. I love spending time with him - learning about his day, how he sees the world, what he thinks about the latest gossip to rock the town. And every night that we see each other, he always takes me to his bed and makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive. A rush of hot pleasure travels through me as flashes of memories from the last time we saw each other run through my mind - mouths on mouths and hands in hair and his cock in my...I have to stop that train of thought before I get too flustered.

I steal another glance at Hopper - who is significantly more intoxicated each time I look over. Two more men have joined his game, and they're regularly ordering drinks. They're getting somewhat rambunctious, but I don't mind. I'd rather he drink here - where I can cut him off or take his keys - than somewhere else. It's busy enough that I can't justify hanging around their party, but it's not so busy that I'm preoccupied, so I take out my notepad and fit in some sketching.

My head snaps up at the sound of a sudden commotion for the pool table - louder than the background noise they were generating - and I'm horrified to see the four men attacking each other! Punches are flying, pool cues are being used as weapons, and they're tossing each other against the wall - knocking over tables, chairs, empty bottles, and knocking down picture frames. I don't know if I should try to break up the fight or call the police, but in the time it takes me to decide, Hopper and his friend manage to knock out their opponents. However, his friend is looking worse for wear, and he sways to the ground.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter in the now silent bar. I hurry over to the scene while conversation slowly resumes. Everyone paused their conversations to watch the fight and assess the damage. It's quieter for longer than is typical after a bar fight - I imagine people are curious to see how I will react and handle the situation. So, I remind myself to treat this incident like I would if it involved anyone else.

"What was that about?" I ask Hopper harshly. He shrugs nonchalantly and leans heavily against the table. He's got a cut on his eye and his knuckles are bleeding, and I have to fight every instinct not to fuss over him. If anyone else caused trouble in my bar, I wouldn't be nearly so forgiving. So I can't be for Hopper. "Jim," I add, letting my annoyance at this disturbance bleed into my voice. Fights are a pain in the ass to deal with - deciding whether to call the cops, dealing with the cops if they show up, cleaning up broken glasses and anything else that was disturbed. I've complained about it multiple times to Hopper when they've happened, so I'm pretty annoyed he would start - or not try harder to prevent - one.

"They were being assholes," he finally grumbles.

"What does that mean?" I ask while kneeling down to inspect the unconscious men. I'm trying to assess if they need an ambulance - checking for a pulse, seeing if their pupils contract when exposed to light. I think they'll be okay, but if they're not stirring in a few minutes, I'll reassess. "Were they cheating?" I ask. He shakes his head. "Were they threatening you?"

"No," he says, voice guarded. "They were just being assholes."

"I'm debating whether I need to call some of your coworkers down here. Give me a reason not to," I tell him in an undertone. He swallows hard at that. "A reason that is unrelated to our relationship," I add as he opens his mouth.

"They were insulting a woman of my acquaintance. And they were being very rude." *Oh.* Everything makes more sense now. I bet those men made some crude remark about me, and Hopper was defending my honor. He's drunk enough that he would think that's a good idea and wouldn't consider the consequences. And he probably didn't want to reveal that's why they fought since he didn't want to admit to such

stereotypical, somewhat chauvinistic, behavior. Once again, my irritation with Hopper all but disappears.

"Alright." The other men start stirring, and I reluctantly help them to their feet. "Gentlemen, I think it's best you leave," I firmly tell the two instigators. With some grumbling and snide comments, they stagger their way to the door. To Hopper's friend, I offer another drink and some basic first aid, but he turns me down in favor of heading home to lie down for a while.

"Can I patch you up in the back?" I ask Jim quietly as his friend heads for the door. He nods subtly. "Alright, give me five minutes, and then I'll get Marge to cover the front while I take my break. He sits down at an empty table while he waits for me to attend to all the orders people waited to give me while I handled the fall out from the fight.

Though it's not much longer than five minutes, it feels like an eternity until I am able to catch up on orders and get Marge to cover for me. I slip into the kitchen with Jim and take him to the management office in the back. We've got a basic first aid kit in there for kitchen injuries and incidents like this.

"I wish you hadn't fought," I tell him while I clean his wounds.

"I know. I'm sorry that I did. But I felt compelled to."

"What did they say?" I ask with some dread. Lucy and my mother warned me that going out with Hopper would give me a reputation; I know it's only a matter of time before people start using words like *slut* to describe me. Maybe that's what happened here.

"They had said that someone I know, a former friend, wasn't fit to be out in society." That catches me off guard. So...this wasn't about me? My pulse picks up in a way that is decidedly unpleasant.

"That sounds pretty rude...but was that really worth getting into a violent fight over?" I try to keep my tone neutral. I don't want him to know how irrationally out of sorts I feel right now.

"Yes. It was." He sits back and closes his eyes while I leave to get bags of ice for his eye and knuckles. As I grab them, my anger simmers.

How dare he cause so much trouble for me over something so minor! By the time I'm back, I'm ready to boil over.

"Here," I say, tossing the bags toward him. He catches them in time, just barely. I put away the medicine kit, taking care to be as loud as possible. He says nothing and just lights up a cigarette. "You can't stay here for long," I tell him with a clipped tone.

"Fine," he says back, nonplussed, putting his feet up on my manager's desk. I knock them off as I head back to the bar. I hear the thuds as he props them up again. "Can you bring me back another beer?" he calls. I take a deep breath to steady myself and slowly turn around.

"No. In fact, maybe you should just go."

"What, why?" he asks, feet falling to the floor.

"Because you're acting like an entitled ass right now, and I'm not in the mood to deal with it," I snap.

"Would you think I was being an entitled ass if it was your honor I was defending?" he asks coolly.

"I know you're not in the habit of considering the consequences of your actions, but maybe if you stopped thinking that everything revolved around you for even one minute, you'd see that your recklessness and impulsiveness has created more work for me, more stress, and damage to the bar. So to answer your question, yes. Now get out." I order, shoving my way through the kitchen doors. Marge stays at the bar, tending to the customers, while I grab a broom to clean up the broken bottles and glasses from Hopper's fight.

Hopper heads out of the bar, cigarette in hand, without so much as a backward glance, never mind a thank you for patching him up or an offer to help clean up the mess he helped create. I shake my head with irritation as I clean up. What the hell was he thinking? This situation doesn't add up. Either he is more careless than I realized, which I don't think is likely, or there is something he isn't telling me. Both options raise my blood pressure - the latter even more so.

The longer I spend cleaning the mess, the more irritated I am. No

doubt this female former friend is someone he used to sleep with. Why else he would attack someone over insulting her. Granted, I thought his whole thing was emotionless one-night stands. Could this have been the girlfriend he said he had after his divorce and he feels indebted to her for his ill-treatment? Whoever she is, the fact that her "honor" was more important than his current girlfriend's time really pisses me off. And makes me concerned he may still have feelings for her. I sulk the rest of the day, my anger with Hopper flaring every time I think of this mystery woman who matters so much to him. I suppose I don't exactly have the right to be mad at him for holding on to feelings for someone he knew before me, but it fills me with the most unpleasant feeling of dread and disgust.

The responsible thing to do would be to be honest with Hopper about why I'm so upset and discuss my concerns. But every time I consider doing that, my impetuous side holds me back. Three days pass before I calm down enough to miss him. More than once in that time, I wonder if this is it - if my anger at his callous and uncaring behavior will end our relationship practically as soon as it started.

It's a full week before I consider reaching out to him. He really upset me - and this is definitely his fault. Doesn't that mean he should apologize? But my anger has finally faded enough to be the bigger person - though my annoyance with the pattern of having to take the initiative to repair things between us keeps my temper sharp.

On the next evening I have off, I bring the phone into my room for privacy and dial Hopper's number.

"Hello?" he answers gruffly on the third ring.

"Hey, it's me," I say simply.

"Oh. Hey." His voice brightens momentarily before falling back to the monotone he answered with.

"How have you been?"

"Fine." There's a short pause. "What about you?" I hesitate a beat before I'm brave enough to be honest with him.

"I've been a little upset." He's quiet for a while, but it doesn't feel like a hostile silence. Though I do get the sense that he bit back a retort.

"I'm sorry to hear that. And I'm sorry that I upset you," he says sincerely. I was hoping he'd apologize for fighting as well, but I'll take what I can get.

"Thank you. That means a lot. I'm sorry that I was so upset about you fighting. I'm not trying to control you or smother you, but it was pretty inconvenient for me."

"I realize that now. I'm sorry - I should have been more considerate about that." I feel the tension melt off me as his apology finally addresses my true concerns.

"Yeah...helping clean up would have been appreciated, too," I add softly. I hear him grumble in a way that indicates he's kicking himself.

"You're right. I should have helped you. I wasn't thinking - I was just pissed off and...I had wanted you to be more understanding. I guess that wouldn't have really been fair, but I just...before we started dating, if I had done something like that, you probably wouldn't have even bothered to question me about what happened and just assumed that I was in the right." His statement - its implications and its accuracy - startle me into a laugh.

"Shit - you're probably right."

"I didn't anticipate this consequence of making things official," he teases.

"Understandable. I didn't realize I was so," *smitten*, I stop myself from saying, "that I gave you so much leeway."

"Yeah. It was really great," he says with a chuckle. There's a comfortable pause. "Do you want to talk about what's really bothering you?" I sigh. Sometimes I forget just how damn perceptive he is.

"We should," I answer, the cheer gone from my voice. "The 'acquaintance' that those men insulted that provoked you into

fighting...who is she?" I twist the phone cord in my fingers as I await his response.

"Her name is Joyce Byers." His voice is heavy. "During high school, she and I dated."

"Oh," I answer, my stomach dropping. It's exactly what I feared. "And you still have feelings for her."

"No," he's quick to answer. "Well...not exactly." I feel like my chest is being constricted. "We have a history. She'll always be...important to me." I shut my eyes as if that would help me not hear those painful words.

"Look, Jim, you don't have to explain. I know you don't like me prying, and I don't want to push you."

"You're not. I want you to know. I *don't* still want to be with her - she's not a threat to you. But she is important to me, and you should know that aspect of me."

"Alright." I keep those words in mind as he tells me of his friendship and romance with Joyce. It helps soften the sting of hearing about a past love.

"Joyce and I met in sophomore English class - we sat next to each other, and she just...she was stunning. She thought I was just a dumb jock, but I eventually managed to charm her, and we became friends. I had a crush on her from the start, but by the time I finally worked up the courage to ask her out, she liked me too." If this tale was about anyone other than Jim - my *Jim* - I would find it endearing. As is, I just listen and try not to feel cut too deeply.

"We dated for a while - and we were inseparable - but this new guy moved to town - Lonnie, I nicknamed him. He thought himself a real bad boy, and he set his sights on Joyce. I was young, and impulsive," that makes me laugh - as if he is not still impulsive. He adds a, "alright, yeah," understanding without a word of explanation why I am laughing. "Anyways, I got real possessive over Joyce - that more than anything else drove her away from me. And we ended up sort of drifting apart and broke up. We stayed friends, but it wasn't quite the

same."

"As you know, after I graduated, I went into the military. That *really* drove us apart because she was always a pacifist, very non-confrontational, usually. We still wrote to each other when I was away, but by the time I came back from my tour of duty, she had been married. To no other than that jerk Lonnie." I suck in a breath sharply at the pain that no doubt caused Hopper.

"I'm sorry." I can almost hear him trying to shrug off the dark feelings.

"That's life. They didn't work out anyways. He was a piece of work to her during their marriage - total deadbeat, always on her case. When she finally managed to separate from him, he left town - and their two sons. Barely sees them anymore."

"That's sad," I add.

"Yeah, I guess. They're good kids. And they're better off without him, if you ask me." He sighs. "Anyways, she and I see each other now and then in passing. Sometimes it feels like old times - there's a long history there, ya know. But she and I are friends, nothing more," he finishes.

"Do you...do you ever wish you were more than just friends?" I ask in a small voice.

"Not since I've been with you," he answers definitively. I hum non-committedly. "I promise," he adds. That helps.

"Thank you for telling me about this and for explaining."

"You're welcome." There's a comfortable pause. "Can I see you again - sometime soon?"

"Yes. I'd like that very much." We set a date for next week - dinner at Benny's - and say goodnight. So, this is what it's like to date a man with baggage. I sigh, staring at the phone, wishing there was an easier solution than to learn to live with the fact that Hopper has had other loves. I dated other guys, and we seemed serious at the time, but none of them come close to what I have with Jim. Part of me will

probably always wish that what we have was unique to him, too.

26. Reconciliation

Reconciliation

Two good things ended up coming from that fight Hopper and I had. The first was that we got to weather a serious disagreement and prove to ourselves, and the many Hawkins citizens following our relationship, that we can make this work. The second was that the make up sex was unbelievably fantastic.

"Oh, fuck," Jim pants, rolling to the side.

"You can say that again," I smile at him, every nerve in my body still buzzing from the ecstasy he just gave to me. I curl up against his chest, entwining my fingers with his. "I missed you," I whisper after we both have the chance to catch our breath.

"I missed you too," he tells me, pulling my body closer against his. I run my fingers across his skin, savouring the feeling of him. I nestle closer, wrapping one of my legs around his. "Stay the night tonight?" he asks, his baritone resonating through me. His question catches me off guard - I didn't expect him to offer such intimacy so soon after a fight, but it is a very pleasant surprise.

"Alright. I'd like that," I answer, smiling up at him. I don't have work until the evening tomorrow, and I am in no way ready to leave him yet. He kisses the top of my head softly.

"I'm glad." His large hands scoop up my body, grabbing hold of my waist and ass, and pulling me on top of him. I gasp and giggle with surprise. "Maybe we could go another round?" I hum with pleasure at the thought, leaning down to kiss him fiercely.

"Yes, please," I say with my most sultry voice.

...

In the morning, we spend a whole half hour together snuggling after his alarm goes off.

"Don't you have to get to work?" I ask reluctantly.

"I do. But I don't want to leave yet," he says. "I'm sure the guys at the station would understand why I'm late. None of them would be on time either if they had you in their bed." His words make me laugh, and his fingers slipping between my legs and finding my clitoris make me moan and arch against him.

"Jim," I gasp, gripping his shoulders and his sheets as he deftly brings me to a shuddering climax. "God, I don't know how many times I can survive you doing that to me," I pant.

"I hope many, many times," he whispers in my ear. I laugh and playfully shove him.

"I hope so too," I say with a tender kiss. "Alright, enough distractions. You have to get to work." I roll out of bed and beckon him to the bathroom.

"Where are you going, babe?" His casual use of the term of endearment sends a thrill down my spine.

"I was gonna shower. Care to join me?" I toss over my shoulder. As I start up the water, I am rewarded with the sound of his blankets being thrown off. Though it takes longer for us to get out of the shower than it would had we showered alone, it was much more *pleasurable* to be together.

When I get home, my mom is already at work, so I don't have to risk getting the nth degree. I'm pretty sure she won't bother, but it's a possibility, and I would very much prefer to avoid having her interrogate me about my sex life.

She gets home just as I'm getting ready to head to work.

"Honey, can we talk?" There's an uncertainty and nervousness in her voice that immediately makes me tense, certain that she's about to lecture me about my sexuality.

"Alright," I say stiffly while coming out of the bathroom.

"I saw some mail that came for you this week - why didn't you tell me that you were applying to art school?"

"Oh." So a lecture, but not the one I was fearing. "I'm not even certain I'm going to apply yet. I just wanted to see what the application would involve. I didn't really want to," *fight about it*, "discuss it yet since I haven't made up my mind."

"I see." She's quiet for a few seconds. "I think you should apply."

"Really?" I ask after a few seconds of stunned silence.

"Yes. If that's what you want. But I don't want you to feel like you have to - like I'm trying to push you out of the house or like I don't want you here."

"Oh, Mom, I don't think that!" I grab her in a quick hug.

"Because I know I've nagged you to get out more, and I don't want you to think that's because I don't want you here. I just want what's best for you. And, if that's art school, then I'll be very proud of you." I have to blink back tears.

"Thank you, Mom."

"Of course, sweetie. Now, I don't want you to be late for work."

"Thanks." I give her a tight hug goodbye. This shift passes quickly as I spend most of it pondering my future. I have three major reservations about sending in an application. It used to be four, but it's down to three now that I have my mom's approval to pursue an art career.

So that leaves reservation one: cost. My dad will take care of tuition if I ask, but that involves asking, and I'm still upset with him about what he did to our family. Reservation two is my relationship with Hopper. As a feminist, I know I shouldn't let a budding relationship hold me back from pursuing my dreams, but Jim makes me happy, and he makes me more complete than I feel alone, even. I'm considering applying to two schools in Chicago and one in Indianapolis. Theoretically, we could do long distance, but considering Jim's communication issues even while we live in the same town, I don't see that going well. Who knows - maybe the possibility of this ending my relationship with Hopper is the impetus for my mom's change of heart regarding an art career. Reservation

three is an internal obstacle. So long as I don't apply, I can assume that my art is good - that I would get in if I did apply. By applying, I put myself at the risk of rejection.

As it stands, I have sent for the applications to see if it is worthwhile to apply. If the applications ask for more art than I have to send or art of different mediums or styles, then the decision is made for me. But if I'm serious about this, I know I need to talk to Hopper about it. Things have been a little rocky lately though, and I don't want to do anything to upset the balance we have settled back into. Because I love where we're at. So, for now, I ruminate on my own.

But, I'm not alone with my debate for long. Testament to how well Hopper knows me, the next time we see each other, he immediately sniffs out something is off.

"Is everything alright?" He asks on the car ride over to his place.

"Yes," I answer automatically. "Why do you ask?"

"You're quieter than usual is all." I hum noncommittally. I had been trying to conceal my pensiveness to avoid discussing what it is I'm debating.

"Is everything alright with you?" I ask, trying to turn the question on him to distract him.

"I've never been better," he tells me, stealing a sideways glance at me. His beautiful deep blue eyes twinkle with amusement and happiness. It makes my heart melt. And it makes my pulse race. He doesn't make it five seconds through his door before I'm all over him, running my fingers through his hair, grinding my body against his, moaning his name while coming completely undone by his touch.

...

"Seriously, Tricia, what's up?" He asks after our rousing love making session. I make a whine. I'm reluctant to tell him - what if he discourages me, tells me I'm being silly, asks me to put my dreams on hold for us - and thus proving true all my doubts and fears? I take a deep breath.

"I'm thinking of applying to art school."

"Really?" he asks, sitting up, jolting me off him slightly. I prop myself up on my elbow, my body tensing at his reaction, preparing for rejection. "That's so great," he says.

"You think so?" I ask, mouth agape.

"Yeah," he answers with conviction. "Absolutely. You're an amazing artist." My heart flutters. "And this is what you want to do, right?" I nod a few times, too touched to speak. "Then you have to," he says simply. There's a hint of sadness buried in his voice - no doubt he is thinking about what that might mean for us. And it means everything that he is still encouraging me. I wrap my arms around him, pooling myself in his lap. He couldn't have reacted more perfectly.

"Thank you. That means everything. But...I'm nervous," I say while lying back down. He lies down too, and we face each other and entwine our hands.

"About what it would mean for us?"

"Yes. But also," I say so that he does not have to voice his thoughts immediately and has some time to take this in, "I am nervous about...what if I don't get in? What if I'm not good enough?"

"Then they'd be idiots, so they must have a bad school you wouldn't want to go to anyways," he jokes before growing more serious. "You're fantastic, Tricia. If you don't get in, you can always apply in another year. But you won't know unless you try." I nod, absorbing his words. "As for us, well. If I had to guess," he says with a growing grin, "you're applying to the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art and Graphics School, and the Indianapolis Artistic Works College." My eyes grow wide as he rattles off my schools of choice.

"How did you know that?" I ask, amazed and dumbfounded. He shrugs.

"Because I know you," he tells me with a tender kiss. "And because I'm a cop. I sometimes manage to not be a total deadbeat," he jokes. "Those are some of the best art schools nearby, and I figured you

wouldn't want to go too far." There's a pause as I wait on tenterhooks for what he'll say next. "Those are weekend trips, easy weekend trips," he adds. My heart soars, thinking he might mean what I think he means.

"You'd do that?" He nods quickly, without hesitation.

"Absolutely." His voice is deep, serious, sensual.

"Oh, Jim," I say, throwing my arms around him and kissing him deeply. I end up staying over again. Once I'm home the next day, I finally work past my reservations and get started on my applications. Knowing that Jim is in my corner helps me push past my fears and focus on the possibilities of what may come.

27. Boyfriend Duties

Boyfriend Duties

"Hey there, stranger," I greet Hopper as he comes into the bar. One of my favorite things about this job now is that my boyfriend gets to visit me at work. It's nice to get to see him. He doesn't come in too often - we both still shy away from being seen together too much in public - but when he does come in, it's great. Especially lately since I've been holed up working on my applications, so we have not seen each other as often as I would like.

"Hey there. What's got you in such a good mood?" he asks while setting his hat down on the counter. It's late afternoon, so there's enough people that there's a quiet hum of conversation, but it's quiet enough that I'm able to spend a considerable amount of time lingering near Hopper.

"Lucy just finished up a shift, and she and I had a good time working together. Also," I say, revealing what I'm most excited about, "Lucy is throwing a Halloween party, and she invited us both!" He looks at me without a trace of emotion. "Isn't that fun?" I prompt. He just shakes his head and takes a gulp of beer.

"Not really. You like Halloween?" he asks with a grimace.

"Yeah," I exclaim, unable to contain my enthusiasm despite Hopper's indications that he's not a fan of the holiday. "Dressing up, candy, games, booze...what's not to like?" he shrugs in the way I've come to notice is an indication of grief - it's like he's trying to push off a blanket of darkness. And then it's so obvious what's wrong, I feel badly I didn't anticipate this reaction. No doubt he especially notices Sarah's absence this holiday. "I'm sorry, Jim," I say softly.

"Don't worry about it," he says, but he takes a long drink from his beer. For a second, I think he's going to ask me for something stronger, but he doesn't. "Don't let me ruin your fun. What are you going as?"

"I had thought about doing Sandy and Danny from *Grease*, but if

you're not going to dress up-"

"Honestly, I'd rather not go," he interrupts. I feel like my foot just missed the last step on a staircase.

"Oh. I mean, I'd understand, of course, if that's what you want," I choke out, fighting my own selfish instincts.

"Yeah," he answers simply.

"Oh. Alright. Then, I'm not sure. Maybe I'll go as someone from Star Trek. I already have the costume."

"That's cool. I didn't realize you were a fan," he says.

"Yeah, my parents and I used to watch it a lot," I answer. But I'm not feeling very enthusiastic about the prospect of going as a repeat costume and without Hopper by my side. I thought it would be our first event as a couple. I've really been looking forward to that. A customer waves me over, so I have an excuse to leave this conversation that's painful for both of us.

By the time I come back, we both act as if our last conversation didn't happen - instead talking about his day, my applications, and where we should go to dinner next. He heads out when things pick up, but his negative reaction to my Halloween plans stays with me, keeping me more morose than I would otherwise be.

I don't want to hurt him by bringing the issue up again, but I really do wish that he would reconsider not going. The next time I see Lucy, she asks me if Hopper will be coming since she needs a head count.

"No, he won't be able to make it," I say, trying to conceal my disappointment.

"Seriously? Why, so he can just sit at home and wallow?" she says with more venom than I expected. "Sorry, I shouldn't be so harsh. But I know how excited you were about going as a couple costume. You should still go as Sandy," she insists. I shake my head with a laugh.

"Then I'd just look like a skanky biker chick."

"So, what's wrong with that?" she says with a wink while munching on fries from the kitchen.

"You mean besides the fact that I'm a taken woman?" She makes a face at that. I can't help but ask, "What?" She shrugs.

"Your 'boyfriend' doesn't seem to be living up to his end of the bargain - how things have been going lately hardly qualify as an exclusive relationship." Her words hurt more than I think she means them to. She softens her tone once seeing how I deflate. "Look, I didn't mean to insult him. But I think he should go out with you, especially considering how excited you were about it."

"You might be right. But he's down about it because Halloween reminds him..." I trail off, not waiting to say the painful words. She nods to show her understanding. "I don't want to be insensitive to that. If anything, I should be there for him that night, not asking him to do something he doesn't want to do."

"I get why you feel that way. But you've been there for him a lot. When's he going to do something for you?"

"He does stuff for me," I insist, but as I search for evidence to prove her wrong, I'm coming up short.

"Like?" she prompts me.

"Well, he pays most of the time when we go out, and he went out of his way to get me a bottle of my favorite wine. He supports me applying to art school. And he had dinner with my mom. He's been open with me about a lot of stuff." She raises her eye brows at me.

"You realize that those are things a boyfriend should *do*, right? Like, he doesn't get a medal for doing the bare minimum."

"He's really good in bed," I add in an attempt to salvage Lucy's view of my relationship. She bursts out laughing.

"While I'm glad for you, once again, that's just what he should be doing. And he should do this for you," she states matter-of-fact.

"You might be right." It hurts to admit because I don't want to fight

with him, especially not about something that will cause him pain.

"It's important to you. He should show up for the things that are important to you, even if it's not a walk in the park for him. You do the same for him." I sigh, nodding.

When I'm getting ready for my next date with Hopper, I feel butterflies in my stomach, but they're not from excitement. I honestly can't believe that I'm nervous to ask my boyfriend to go out with me. Part of me notes that can't be a good sign, but I ignore that voice for fear of it unearthing deeper insecurities in our relationship.

All through dinner, I notice my palms are sweaty, and even though I have a good amount of wine, I can't smile as freely with him as I did before. At the back of my mind, there's a worm of doubt...is our relationship unequal - have I been too wrapped up in the excitement and the romance of being with Jim that I didn't see the disparity? Have I been giving him too much credit for just showing up? *Should* he get more credit for showing up than someone else would? All these considerations race around my head, distracting me from enjoying our date.

When we're back at his place, his kisses and his touches light a fire in me. I drape my arms around his shoulders, and to my surprise, he picks me up. I gasp in surprise and from the feel of his hands cupping my ass before I lean into the kiss and wrap my legs around his hips. He carries me to the bedroom. backwards. I know what's going to happen next - his strong hands will find my most sensitive and responsive areas, and he'll bring me to a new level of ecstasy while his cock plunders me.

Just the thought of it makes me weak in the knees and my head go foggy, but as he lays me down on the bed, my reservations shoot to the surface. He lays next to me, kissing the nape of my neck while his hands trace down the curves of my body. I try to relax in to his touch, enjoy the heat of his kisses and his caresses, but I just feel stiff and out of sorts.

"Jim, wait," I tell him, pulling away and sitting up against the headboard.

"What's up?" he asks, concerned. I take a deep breath, fighting back the instinct to protect Hopper from any pain - especially that which I can prevent. My needs are important too, I remind myself.

"It's about Halloween." He sighs and sits back, his concern replaced with irritation.

"What about it?"

"This is our first holiday as a couple. The first event that we could do together. I was really excited about it, and it makes me sad that you don't want to go. I understand why, I really do, but I just...I wish you would at least consider coming with me." He sighs and pulls me closer, his arm around me. I wait, pulse racing, for him to respond.

"I understand. I can't say I like it, but I understand why you want that." I run my hand across his chest, trying to ease some of his discomfort. "Alright, I'll go with you. But I don't want to dress up," he concedes. I reach up to kiss him on the cheek.

"Thank you. Thank you - this means so much."

"You're welcome. Besides, I couldn't let you out on your own in a skimpy Star Trek uniform, you'd attract all sorts of unsavory characters," he teases, running his hands over my body. I grin and shift so that I'm straddling him.

"You think so?" I ask while running my hands down his chest and slowly grinding my hips against his.

"I know so," he says, a little breathless with wanting. With my doubts resolved, we spend the night in a wild marathon of love-making.

28. Halloween

Halloween

Despite Hopper's plans to go in regular clothes, I will be dressing up as Sandy from *Grease*. It's not everyday that I get to tease and curl my hair and dress in head-to-toe, tight leather, and I figure that even out of costume, Hopper is enough of a "bad boy" to capture Danny's essence. Also, I think Hopper will enjoy my outfit, and I'm trying to make it as enjoyable a night as possible. Which is one of the reasons I'll be driving tonight.

When I pick him up at 9, he looks more like the Grouch from *Sesame Street* than any degree of bad boy. He's wearing a flannel, jeans and a deep scowl. I suppress a sigh as he gets into the car - I asked him to come, not that he had to come happy. I only hope he'll lighten up as the night progresses, or he'll ruin the holiday for me and him.

"How are you?" I ask him on the drive over.

"Fine," he grumbles. I wish I knew what I could say to lighten this funk he's in. I'm struck that I don't know how to comfort him. Does he want me to talk to him? Does he want to be quiet? Shouldn't I know how to help him at this point in our relationship?

"You look nice," he says after a few minutes of silence. I hadn't realized he had so much as looked at me, so the compliment takes me off guard.

"Thank you," I reply sincerely.

"You're welcome. Do you know who all is going to be at this party?" he asks.

"Not really, but I figure it'll be a few people from the bar and her friends from high school. I'm looking forward to meeting them," I say as cheerfully as possible.

"Don't get too excited," he says in a monotone.

"What do you mean by that?" I ask as calmly as I can, trying not to let

my irritation with his cold behavior show.

"Let's just say I've already met a few of Lucy's friends. In a professional capacity." It takes a moment for me to puzzle out what he's implying.

"They're troublemakers?" I ask.

"Yes. And a few of them are petty crooks."

My palms are starting to sweat at the prospect of arriving at the party.

"I'm sure she does not hang out with them anymore," I say with more confidence than I feel.

When I pull up to Lucy's block, the whole street is lined with cars.

"I didn't realize she invited so many people," I say.

"I'm sure she didn't," he says, lighting a cigarette as we get out of the car. "I'd guess her friends invited their friends, and so on."

I take a deep breath - this is not at all what I was expecting. I figured it'd be a quieter gathering of her close friends. But we're here, and I want to make the most of it.

The house she shares with some of her friends is lit up and music blares from the windows so loudly I think the frame of the house is rattling. When we open the door, I'm assaulted by the noise of the party goes and the smell of alcohol and other, less legal drugs.

"Jesus, is half of Hawkins at this party?" I say to Hopper as an aside, but I still have to shout it over the noise.

He just shrugs. For some reason, I think the sight of the crowd and the ridiculous noise levels have brightened his mood.

"Let's find a drink," he yells into my ear so I can hear him. I nod and we begin to navigate the ocean of bodies to make our way down the hallway. As we search for the kitchen, I keep an eye out for Lucy - she said she was going as a nurse - but it's hard to see even a few feet

down the hallway with the crowd. The living room is a roiling sea of dirty dancing and spilled drinks, and I don't want to find out what's happening in the bedrooms.

In the kitchen, there's a bit of a respite from the noise and smell of the rest of the house as people are only coming in and out for drinks, but there's also a couple drunkenly making out in one corner against the counters. Hopper and I exchange an amused glance at this blatant PDA before he grabs a beer, and I take a moderate serving of the spiked punch.

"Where to now?" he asks after a swig of beer.

"Try to find Lucy? Let's check the basement."

"Fine by me," he says. We quickly have to abandon that plan, however, as the crowd is so packed that we cannot move down the basement stairs.

I shoot him a helpless glance. I'm pretty far out of my depth here. He grabs my hand and leads me to the living room, where, to my surprise, he actually starts dancing to the nonsense pop song playing. Despite the bodies we are constantly bumping into and the crowd that jostles us more often than not, I enjoy dancing like horny teenagers to the music. Between the darkened room and the alcohol, my self-consciousness leaves for long enough that I am able to just enjoy being with Hopper and having his large hands on my waist.

He pulls me into a heated kiss, his hands tangling in my hair, and I don't care one bit that he's disrupting the hairstyle I worked so hard on. I just need more of his skin on me.

He breaks away from the kiss to take a deep gulp of beer before his hands are back on my waist. We dance a few more songs, and each time I want him more and more. The mood is broken though as the crowd swells around us, closing us in to the mosh pit as more people join the dance floor. As it becomes uncomfortably crowded, Hopper grabs my hand and pushes through the sea of people. Some let us through without so much as a glance, but it is apparent who recognizes Hopper, as they practically recoil from him and visibly try to sober up as he passes.

Once we finally break through the crowd, we share a laugh at the latter reaction.

"They know you're the town drunk, right?" I tease him.

"I may be the town drunk, but I'm still an authority figure. Besides, I'm on the up and up now, thanks to you," he says with an elbow to my side.

I look up at him with a mischievous glance.

"Yeah, I'm such a good influence," I say with my hands on my leather-clad hips, cocked to one side.

He runs his eyes over me and then slowly reaches out to grab my hips, pulling me flush against him.

"Maybe tonight you're not," he says into my ear, punctuating the statement with a nip on my earlobe.

I arch my body up against him, unconcerned if anyone notices or stares, and I drape my arms around his neck to pull him into a kiss. He obliges, kissing me slowly and deeply.

"I want to be alone with you," he growls, breaking away to gaze at me while he runs his thumbs across my hips.

"Then let's be alone," I say, turning and tugging him after me.

We hastily leave the living room and pass the kitchen in a quest for a private corner. I find a door slightly ajar and see a sink. Perfect. A little trashy, but then so am I tonight. I push into the room, expecting to have Hopper pin me against the wall and ravage me, so I am more than a little surprised to find the bathroom is occupied.

A woman I haven't seen before is communing with the toilet bowl while a scantily clad nurse is holding her hair - oh my god that's Lucy.

"Lucy?" I call, taking in the plunging neckline and dramatic make up.

"Tricia, you made it," she slurs happily, turning to me but not entirely

forgetting her duty to her friend.

"I did. This is quite the party, Lucy."

"I know," she exclaims the way only drunks can. "Just like high school, right Hopper?" she says, acknowledging him.

"Just like your high school, maybe," he says with a teasing smile.

"Hell yeah," she exclaims.

Her friend makes a very definite retching sound, drawing Lucy's attention.

"You want to get out of here?" I mouth to Hopper.

He nods slowly but seriously a few times, and we duck out the door.

When we finally push through the crowd and make it through the door, I heave a sigh of relief. I didn't realize how much the noise and crowd had made me tense - not even the buzz of alcohol warded off the anxiousness. It's infinitely better to be outside in the crisp fall air - every step from the raucous house relaxes me more.

"I'll drive," Hopper calls as we get to the car, his hand outstretched for the keys.

I dig in my purse for them for a moment and then lob them to him. We each had one drink, but since he's considerably larger than me with a higher tolerance, it makes sense for him to drive.

"Well, that was a bust," I say morosely once we're seated in my car.

"I don't think so," he says, more chipper than I expected.

"No, why not?"

"You got me out on Halloween," he says seriously, and it warms my heart. "And I feel vindicated that I haven't been missing all that much these past few years."

I laugh heartily. "You're right, that is a good thing."

"And on top of all that, my girlfriend looks absolutely ravishing in skintight leather," he says, a subtle rumble of hunger in his voice.

I look at him from the corner of my eye and bite my lip. "Take me home?" I say in my best impression of post-makeover Sandy.

The steering wheel jerks in his hands as he struggles to maintain focus on the road.

"Yes, please," he says, driving a little faster than he probably should. But I don't mind. I can't wait to get his hands on me either.

We burst through his door, and he gathers me into his arms, pressing me up against the wall. I moan softly into his mouth as his hands tangle in my hair. I deepen our kiss, rolling my body against his and relishing in the feel of his body pressed against mine.

"Hopper," I moan, my voice heavy with lust. "I need you," I blurt out as his lips cover my neck, draping seductive kisses across my skin that explode into fireworks of longing. The alcohol pours over the lust he inspires, sending the flames in my belly roaring to life. I grab at his wrists and pull him towards the bedroom. He follows, his hands finding my waist as we get to his room.

He casually tosses me on his bed, gentle but demanding, and my need for him soars. I pull off my top, exposing my breasts, and he pauses his domination of me to admire them with his lips and his hands. I lean back against his bed, tugging him down with me, and he kisses me, fully covering my mouth and leading me in exactly how he wants to kiss me and be kissed, his fingers and tongue prompting slight adjustments or switching up his technique, darting and daring and building my need for him.

I let him take complete control, following his lead but always encouraging him to give me more of him, to take more of me. I lightly nip at his bottom lip, provoking a soft growl. His hands find my wrists and pin them to the bed.

"That was very dangerous, Tricia," he says darkly in my ear.

"How so?" I ask, my voice low and sultry.

"You're going to make me so horny I might just lose control. And truly ravish you," he says, trailing a finger down my throat.

I moan, arching my back to better display my tits for him. "Please ravish me," I whisper.

"Are you sure?" he asks, hunger clear in his voice. "I might hurt you."

"I don't care. I need it," I say, encouraging him with a twitch of my hips against his erection. He looks down at me like a starving dog about to devour a steak. "Don't hold back," I command.

"If you insist," he growls and grabs my waist with finality.

I squeal with surprise as he pulls me to the edge of the bed and hastily tugs off my pants before unbuckling his own. They fall to his ankles and he steps out of them, stepping towards me. Obliging, I spread my legs, anticipation making my legs twitch before he's even touched me. He deftly positions himself against my opening before pushing inside in one slow, smooth thrust that tears a moan from my lips as I arch my hips to take every inch of him.

"Jim," I moan as I grind my hips against his, feeling his hard cock filling me. His large hands keep me pinned in place as one holds my waist and the other holds my neck.

Moving with torturous control, Jim slowly pulls out before slamming deep inside me. Each time he repeats this move, I moan and beg him for more. The fourth time, he delivers. He slams into me deep and long, and instead of pausing to savor the sensation, he pulls out again, thrusting over and over again and sending me soaring. I take each thrust, writhing with pleasure and moving on him while he drives into my body. Every now and then, an expression of pure ecstasy crosses his face when I move against him at just the right time. To have him inside me, on top of me, it's all I want in life. It's all I need. And he knows just how to meet that need.

"More," I beg him breathlessly as his hips rock against mine.

"More?" he asks, his voice teasing. He leans down over me and lays a trail of kisses down my throat before rising to bite at my ear. "I don't

think you can take more."

"I can," I whisper seriously, determined to have him fuck me as hard as he can, determined to feel that much pleasure. He kisses me hard and deep, our lips and limbs a tangle of passion as he continues to thrust against me.

"If you insist," he says. He pulls away and stands, lifting me up by my hips and flipping me over so I'm lying face down on the bed. His arms induce me to stand, pulling up on me so that I'm upright with my knees pressed against his bed.

He pushes his cock between my legs and deep inside me, and I arch my back, pushing my ass out, so that he can get even deeper. He slams his thick cock inside of me, using his grip on my arms to propel my body up and down his cock. He's deeper than he's been before, he's fucking me harder than I've ever been fucked. And I can feel every last barrier I had put between us collapse like cardboard. I'm nothing if not his. And I am entirely his.

"Why haven't you fucked me this hard before?" I gasp out between his thrusts, my vision fading out as I struggle to keep my eyes open. The only reason I've managed to keep breathing is to keep feeling his cock inside me.

"I didn't know if you could take it," he grunts, his hands gripping me even tighter.

"I can take it," I sigh as another climax shakes through me. I lost count which number that was of the night.

"You're right - you can," he says, his hips angling even deeper.

I let out a scream in response to this new angle, and he continues plowing inside me while I ride each new wave of pleasure tinged with pain - he's so deep.

"Please don't stop," I order as I feel him flagging behind me.

"So demanding," he pants from exertion, a smile in his voice.

"I can't help it - I need this." And I didn't even know how badly I did

until he fucked me like this. He pulls out, and I whimper in sadness, but his hands on my hips, he quickly bids me to turn around, and he then pushes me back on the bed. He climbs over me, sliding inside me once more, and I sigh and wrap my legs around him.

"Tricia," he moans, and a slight shudder runs down his back as he buries his length inside me. He feels so damn good. I raise my hips, grinding against him. He sighs with pleasure, his muscles taunt.

"Hold still," he orders. I instantly freeze. "You feel so good, but I don't want to cum just yet. You need more."

After a few deep breaths, he grits his teeth and continues on, sweat beading on his forehead as he brings me another exquisite release that leaves me trembling around his cock.

"Jim, oh, god. You're my god."

He speeds up his thrusts, his hips driving into me. He's the only thing I can think about. The pleasure builds so intensely that I have to fight to draw enough oxygen. He sends my limbs trembling with pleasure as wave after wave of endorphins rush through me. I end the release gasping and struggling to anchor my mind to anything at all. My limbs feel like jello as I lay in his arms taking more of him. My mind and body is awash in the knowledge that I am Hopper's. He is my Lord, my God, the love of my life. I kiss him frantically as he continues his unrelenting subjugation of my body. Every touch is pure electricity and a command for more of my body that I will willingly follow.

"I love you," falls from my lips as he sends another mind-wiping rush of heat and electricity through me.

He buries his face in my neck. "I love you, too," he whispers, never relinquishing his control of my body, never slowing down his thrusts. I wrap my arms around his torso, my fingernails skate across his back, trying to release some of this exquisitely torturous energy coursing through me.

"Oh, Jim," I scream one last time, my body shuddering and quaking around his cock. "Jim, I can't take it anymore, oh, God," I moan as he

brings me to another climax.

"No?" he says, clearly pleased by the state I'm in. He keeps driving his hips into me. "I thought you said you could take it."

"Jim, I want to, you know I want to. But you're...you're so much. So much cock," I babble, my mind too flooded from endorphins to function.

"I should cum, huh? You want my cum?"

"Yes, please," I seize on the idea, now desperate to have him shoot his cum over me.

"Tell me what you want," he says, his voice heavy with lust, his muscles twitching with the need to release.

"I want your cum, Jim. Please, give it to me, cover me with you-"

His body stills, his hands dig into me, and with a deep moan, he releases his pleasure hot and wet against my opening. Gasping, he kisses me deeply, gathering me into his arms.

He rolls over and pulls me against him, sighing heavily. "Tricia, holy fuck I needed that." He runs his hands over my body, kissing me with adoration. "My god, you're gorgeous," he says, gazing at me in the moonlight that comes through his window.

"You're amazing," I adore in turn. "I needed that too. Thank you for...Thank you for that."

"It was my pleasure," he says with a grin, nuzzling his face against mine.

"And, Jim, what I said, about loving you - I meant it." He stills and grows serious. I wait for his response with wide eyes.

"I meant it too," he says.

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him desperately.

"I want to give you something," he says, rising suddenly and leaving

the room.

"Oh?" I ask, sitting up.

When he returns a minute later, his hand is clasped.

"What's this?" I ask.

"I thought it was time. You've been spending enough time here, it seems silly to not to just give you one of these."

His hand opens, and I have to stifle a gasp. He's holding a key.

"Is this to..."

"Yes." He smiles at me, and I beam at him, taking the proffered key from the palm of his hand.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice threatening to crack.

In response, he leans in and kisses me deeply.

"I love you, Tricia."

"I love you too," I say, with rapture. I can't believe Jim just gave me a key to his house - and *told me he loved me*. I wrap him in a tight hug. He kisses me so fiercely I end up laying back on the bed, our limbs so tangled I hardly know where I end and he begins.

"Stay?" he asks in the space between our many kisses.

"Of course," I say with a nuzzle against his chest, settling in for the night.

A/N: Apologies for the delay in updating! I will try to update more frequently...only a couple more chapters to go until we catch up to Stranger Things Season 1! Thank you to all the readers who have stuck with me despite the delay :).